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Personal Effects

On Violence and Everyday Life in Warsaw's
Anthropogenic Stratum¹

Apothecary's bottle, whole, closed — cap intact. Enamel pot, dented. Floor tile, fragmented, blue. Encaustic tile, chipped. Pig jaw, fragmented — teeth. Oven tile — ornamental frieze. Pin — Star of David, bicycle. Silver fork — bent teeth. Chicken bone — leg. Rib. Comb — tattered teeth. Glazed tile, brown — floral relief.

In the third week of September 2015, Aslı Çavuşoğlu, Simone De Iacobis and Małgorzata Kuciewicz conducted an excavation² in a residential courtyard near Karmelicka Street in Warsaw's Muranów housing estate. Commissioned by the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, the intervention was to expose the fact that the estate is built upon several metres of post-World War Two rubble. Dubbed "The Cut," the project openly involved local residents and institutions, as well as photographers, curators, and specialists in the fields of architectural history, heritage conservation, archaeology, and anthropology. I was invited to join as an academic advisor and critic. As the project progressed, my advisory role shifted towards a participatory one. I had the opportunity to observe and partake in both the excavation and the surrounding discussion for four days between September 22 and September 25. Like the rest of the team, I was hit with archaeological fever, eager to discover each layer of rubble, struck with how much I wanted to stand inside "The Cut."

This essay is both a critical and a deeply personal response to a project that, literally and figuratively, opened a rich discursive field in Warsaw's public space. Rather than a typical critique, my complicity in the project demands a parallel textual 'incursion' into the discursive field opened up by the authors, organizers, curators, and participants. My aim is to explore the compound and structural violence inflicted in Warsaw's domestic realm, and to ask if "The Cut" (and its participants) reified and perpetuated that violence, or, on the contrary, if the project created a physical and intellectual wedge that allowed Varsovians to 'bring home' discourses surrounding abusive socio-spatial practices in Warsaw. In their article, "Przemoc filosemicka" (Philo-

Semitic Violence), Elżbieta Janicka and Tomasz Żukowski deconstruct Jolanta Dylewska's film "Po-lin" (2008)³, and problematize the recent practice of including Jews in the dominant Polish cultural narrative.⁴ Despite good intentions, suggest Janicka and Żukowski, this "inclusion that the living apply to the dead" can result in a situation where "old forms of subjugation give way to new ones."⁵ In an effort at contrition or reconciliation, the dominant group speaks, writes, and witnesses for the dead in ways that serve to absolve the living of responsibility and reinforce their cultural hegemony.⁶

Janicka and Żukowski eloquently discuss forms of philo-Semitic subjugation of memory in Dylewska's portrayal of a contemporary Polish woman inhabiting a formerly Jewish house. Their reading exposes a disturbing visual power differential: The Blessed Virgin Mary, whose likeness adorns a domestic altar, protectively gazes at the mezuzah on the doorframe.⁷ Here, the complex and unequal relationship between Poles and Jews is woven into the confines of a small home. For Janicka and Żukowski, domesticity becomes a field for their critique of a Polish cultural appropriation of Jewish pasts, Jewish memories, and indeed, Jewish domesticity. I borrow the term 'domestic violence' from the social sciences to address the paradox of violent intimacy in the context of cohabitation.⁸ That particular triad of circumstances at once describes the realities of living and dying in wartime Warsaw, and identifies the contradictions of an abusive prewar and wartime cultural cohabitation of Poles and Jews that Janicka and Żukowski posit as the substrate for contemporary philo-Semitic violence in Poland.

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Drawing on their reading of the visual tension between the Madonna and the mezuzah, I suggest here a shifted definition of domestic violence that takes into account violence inflicted upon, and within, the urban residential fabric of Warsaw. This pertains specifically to the ways in which the typical 19th century Warsaw courtyard-based tenement house (*kamienica*) became a locus of wartime survival and insurgent tactics: hiding, escaping, barricading, betraying, executing, and interring.⁹ The material remains of that domestic architectural morphology make up the lion's share of Warsaw's rubble stratum. It is with a sensitivity to the histories of domestic Jewish-Polish socio-spatial inequa-

← 1: Objects excavated from a rubble mound near Karmelicka Street, Warsaw, September 2015.

lities, to the post-domestic contents of Warsaw's rubble, and to a violently domestic and domesticated racialization of space in the Warsaw Ghetto, that I turn to a close reading of "The Cut."

WUNDERKAMMER

"The Cut" started in a domestic way, during a neighbourhood picnic held on site and led by the landscape architect Krzysztof Herman. I missed this opening day, but photos showed a congenial atmosphere: the elderly asked questions while children made clay models of proposed excavation volumes. Rather than digging in the clay, they created solid forms that inversely foreshadowed the absence of excavated space. The following day, four taciturn but kind gardeners broke ground and began to sculpt a curiously comfortable, but at once defensive, domesticity—a child-sized fort calmly dug after lunch between one and five in the afternoon.

The extraordinary density of residential things and their fragments made this dig different from other archaeological excavations. The first day rendered a daunting volume and variety of objects of domestic use, accompanied by a small number of symbolic, narrable souvenirs.¹⁰ Two very personal artefacts made an immediate impact: a lapel pin with a bicycle and the Star of David was delicately stored alongside a small red and white cross. Compelling things that lend themselves to storytelling, such as a silver fork

or an apothecary's bottle, were found among ubiquitous fragments of domestic construction and domestic existence — broken bricks (the substance of walls), crushed tiles (the covering of floors), and shattered plates (the settings for daily meals) — everything that had sheltered and ritualized dwelling only seventy years ago. The residential location reinforced the feeling of domesticity. The excavation took place at the side of a quiet, tree-filled courtyard surrounded by low-rise apartment buildings. Elderly, elusive silhouettes dotted the curtained windows. It was all akin to rummaging through grandmother's closet with her ghost present in the room. Strands of time, refracted through the artefacts and reflected from the rubble-filled walls, converged into a 'Wunderkammer' — a courtyard of disparate culinary curiosities: pots, pans, oven tiles, the armature of a whole kitchen, fork teeth, pig teeth, ribs, vertebrae...

I feared finding bones, but they found me within the first moments of my presence on site. After that, bones came at an ever-greater frequency. Participants handled them with care, but also with a surprising (or perhaps natural) familiarity — even the skeletons were domesticated. Before the Museum's anthropologist confirmed that these were animal bones left over from domestic consumption, a little pile of them rested under a small rock. Once in a while a hand would lift the rock and another bone would be added. That miniature symbolic grave drew so



← 2: Fragment of an animal jaw found in a rubble mound near Karmelicka Street, Warsaw, September 2015.

↗ 3: School group visiting the excavation site near Karmelicka Street, Warsaw, September 2015.



much of my focus that I could only ever see the hand. The face of the gazer is absent from my memory.

After a day or two of the routine, coming on site was like coming home: excitement about the day's new findings, and then careful and quiet sifting through fresh batches of rubble. The community also grew more and more comfortable with the project. At one point I came on site to witness two teenage girls jovially raking through a large pile of excavated rubble. The girls would periodically hand me things: another oven tile, part of a clay pipe, a shoe vamp, the severed neck of a green bottle. I placed these objects next to the collection of treasures (the pin with the Star of David and the red cross), not because the vamp or the bottleneck had any authorized archaeological value, but because the community cared to find them.

At different moments objects emerged in different ways, were handled differently, valued differently, and exhibited differently. The sheer mass of found objects altered the intended architectural and spatial focus of the dig and compelled its participants to consider questions of archaeological and heritage value, as well as complex anthropological problems surrounding

legal, cultural, and ethical ownership. Legally speaking, the objects belonged to the municipality. They could not be removed without a tedious administrative procedure that involved the heritage conservation office. The Museum's curatorial role in the project did not guarantee ownership of the artefacts. The local school wanted some objects for educational purposes. The project archaeologist, Ryszard Cędrowski, felt that a small group of artefacts should be kept because they showed promise of narrative value, useful in a curatorial context. Finally, wary of fetishizing objects, and perhaps in an effort to redress the inherent violence of excavation, the artists and architects in charge of the project proposed to rebury most, or even all, of the artefacts.¹¹

These disciplinary and institutional positions make palpable the question of rubble ownership, and ultimately, of a cultural identification with rubble. Who, if anyone, has a cultural and ethical right to the rubble of Warsaw? There is certainly no straightforward answer, but by bringing up rubble ownership in the context of domesticity, I signal that narratives about cultural and legal proprietorship in Warsaw have historically been racialized, and are now intertwined with precarious property restitution practices.



In the end, Asli, Małgorzata, and Simone chose to occupy the pre-excavation ground plane with evenly spaced bricks recovered from the rubble. The rational, Cartesian grid of bricks imposed on “The Cut” paused to accommodate its edges, and then continued on the other side. All the pots, pans, plates, pipes, combs, rods, bones, and bottles — fitted with their own masonry plinths — reflected new curatorial adjacencies.¹² What were once accidental relationships of proximity in the ground, now became meaningful, intentionally transgressive narratives — teeth sat next to toothpaste.

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In the rubble, there was no legible stratigraphic logic — objects existed next to each other in a disorder that resisted (philo-Semitic or other) ideological processing — but in a curatorial context, the objects began to gain semiotic legibility. With an application of logic, as well as professional and cultural sensibilities, the cabinet of curiosities became a temporary outdoor museum. The authors singled out objects

from the domestic “urban soup” to help create and sustain precise and contemporary discursive strands.¹³

DOMESTICATING VIOLENCE

In order to problematize domestic violence in the context of the location of the “The Cut,” it is crucial to explore the destruction and dispersal of both architectural and social (residential) fabrics in Warsaw. That destruction, contrary to what many historians of Warsaw argue, was morphologically extremely varied, and depended on the social makeup of wartime inhabitants.¹⁴ Indeed, the ubiquitous visual identification of all of Warsaw with its destroyed ghetto is a cultural appropriation of a trauma that occurred in an urban district long considered by Poles to be “culturally foreign.”¹⁵

During the war, German social zoning capitalized on, and exacerbated, existing pre-war socio-spatial inequalities in Polish-Jewish relations. This extended to the ways in which Germans, Poles, and Jews used, destroyed, and reconstituted residential fabric during and after the war. Whereas the postwar city outside the ghetto walls¹⁶ presented a varied combination of destroyed, decaying, and intact tenements, the postwar fabric of the Jewish ghetto, except

↑ 4 Outdoor exhibition of excavated objects near Karmelicka Street, Warsaw, September 2015.

for a few single walls, could no longer be classified as architecture, or even any kind of most broadly understood architectural morphology.¹⁷ In fact, on the 1945-46 Damage Survey Map of Warsaw, the ghetto, bounded by a yellow line, is simply left unmarked.¹⁸ In contrast to the rest of Warsaw, dwellings in the northern sections of the Ghetto were, indeed, reduced to amorphous heaps of rubble.

The Warsaw tenement or kamienica was the primary form of residential enclosure in Warsaw. It was the stage for a struggle for domestic existence. As Ella Chmielewska points out, “in the traditional morphology of Warsaw tenements, the courtyard was an intimate territory, a node in the networks of movement, the system of localized commerce and the infrastructure for social relations.”¹⁹ During the war, she continues, the courtyard became “a centre of the violence inflicted on the city: a place of shelter, of battle, of prayers between aerial attacks and of quick burials.”²⁰

Immediately after the war, patterns of habitation remained contingent upon wartime spatial inequalities and spatialized racism. The former Warsaw Ghetto was virtually uninhabitable. In the rest of the city, life became a constant negotiation of the physical traces of violence. The morphology of ruined spaces, and the composition of rubble, defined the kinds of dwellings that people could create, and the kinds of domestic lives they could lead. The ruin became a home with a violent past and an unpredictable future: it meant temporary safety or shelter, but it could also collapse, trap, and kill at any moment. People lived in an awkward symbiosis with the ruin. They introduced partial stability into the ruin’s material precariousness through habitation, but at once mined that same ruin for material that could be sold or reused for construction.²¹

In subsequent years, writes Chmielewska, “the courtyard [became] a critical tool in the ideological battles of the new regime where the condition of light between the buildings [was] deployed in the post-war urban reconfiguration.”²² The kamienica, often partially ruined and now with a paradoxically better lit and ventilated courtyard, became the site for an ideological urban war over architecture and social class. This war continues today — albeit in a distinctly

neoliberal socio-economic condition — in the form of numerous legal struggles over property restitution, some of these predicated on an uneasy negotiation of lingering Polish-Jewish inequalities.²³

The structural presence of violence in the domestic realm in Warsaw — that fact that the home in collective memory can both protect and kill, welcome and trap — means that the trope of the home is intrinsically linked to violence.²⁴ In the context of “The Cut,” digging at the border of the ghetto must be conceptually and ethically linked to a history of domestic racial and spatial violence. Domestic violence is present in Polish tropes of cultural trauma; its material effects are physically embedded in the ground and the walls. The apartment buildings surrounding “The Cut” not only sit on terraces of rubble three to five metres deep, but they are also made of that very rubble.²⁵ The light red blocks that peek out from under socialist realist plaster ornaments are composed of milled bricks and a variety of other rubble contents.²⁶ Today’s mass housing is founded upon material, bodily, and metaphysical domestic violence. A complex web of contingent social, spatial, racial, and material violence plays out in an anthropogenic stratum abnormally thick for its relative youth.²⁷

“The Cut” reminds us that the rubble glacier—which ever so slowly weaves its way through Warsaw’s neighbourhoods, courtyards, parks, and riverbeds—stores millions of physically and semiotically displaced objects of domestic use. To dig in that glacial stratum at the border of the ghetto (but just outside), and in direct proximity to buildings made of rubble concrete, is to intrude at the symbolic epicentre of Warsaw’s troubled consciousness. Ominously, the experience of disturbing that epicentre — the experience that “the living apply to the dead” — is strangely calm, eerily normal, completely domesticated.

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1 This article is an expanded version of my exhibition catalog text, "Domesticating Violence: Notes from a Socio-Spatial Incursion into Warsaw's Anthropogenic Stratum," in *Presence/ Absence/ Traces: Contemporary Artists on Jewish Warsaw*, ed. Ewa Chomicka and Agnieszka Pindera. (Warsaw: POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, 2016), 164–181.

2 The Museum uses the term "archaeological excavation" to describe the project, see "Warsaw, Muranów: Archaeological Cut," last modified September 16, 2015, accessed October 31, 2015, <http://www.polin.pl/en/news/2015/09/16/warsaw-muranow-archeological-cut>.

3 The film "Po-lin. Okruchy pamięci" uses both pre-war archival footage and contemporary interviews to weave a reconciliatory story of Jewish-Polish domestic and commercial relations in small town 1930s Poland.

4 Elżbieta Janicka and Tomasz Żukowski, "Przemoc filosemicka," *Studia Litteraria et Historica* 1 (2012): 1–39. The authors use the term 'abuse' rather than 'violence' when translating the Polish word 'przemoc' for the English-language online version of their abstract. Following the Oxford/PWN Polish-English Dictionary, I have chosen to primarily use the word 'violence' because of its physical and legal implications. I turn to 'abusive' when talking about dominating or isolating behaviours. Whereas 'abuse' can be defined as "any behaviour or pattern of behaviour used to coerce, dominate, or isolate," (Gillis and Diamond), violence is "the deliberate [and unlawful] exercise of physical force against a person [or] property" (Oxford). In the context of the murder of people and the illegal and forceful dispossession and destruction of their property, violence is the more appropriate term, see Roy J. Gillis and Shaindl Diamond, "Same Sex Partner Abuse: Challenges to the Existing Paradigm of Intimate Violence Theory," in *Cruel But Not Unusual: Violence in the Canadian Family*, ed. Ramona Allagia and Cathy Vine, (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 128; "violence, n.," Oxford English Dictionary Online, last modified September 2015, accessed October 31, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223638?rskey=wTvbBE&result=1&isAdvanced=false>; Oxford/PWN Polish-English Dictionary, (October 31, 2015), <http://pwn-oxford.pwn.pl/haslo.php?id=1993417>.

5 Janicka and Żukowski, "Przemoc filosemicka," 1 (see n. 4).

6 When talking about the death of Polish Jews, it is important to note that today there is a small but active Jewish community in Warsaw. For reflections on problematic attempts in Warsaw to use Jewish memory as a way towards cosmopolitanism, see Michael Meng, *Shattered Spaces: Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011), 250.

7 Janicka and Żukowski, "Przemoc filosemicka," 13–14 (see n. 4).

8 For a history of trauma as it relates to the politics of domestic violence and abuse, see Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

9 For discussions of hiding as well as insurgence in the context of dwelling in Warsaw, see Elżbieta Janicka, "A Hide-out in Demo Version: The Keret House in Warsaw as Re-enactment of Jewish Hiding," *Holocaust Studies*, 20 (1–2) 2014: 83–116, 97.

10 For a description of the variety of objects of domestic use separated from domestic spaces in Warsaw, see Ian MacMillan, "Warsaw, Poland. Early October 1944," *Chicago Review*, 37 (2 / 3), 1991; quoted in Ella Chmielewska, "Stillness" in *Stasus* (James A. Craig and Matt Ozga-Lawn), *Pamphlet Architecture 32: Resilience*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012): 22–25, 25.

11 This reburial can also be understood as a symbolic (if temporary) closure of the discursive space.

12 For reflections on material adjacencies in Warsaw, see Chmielewska, "Stillness," 23–25 (n. 10).

13 According to Małgorzata Kuciewicz, among Warsaw's architects, "zupa miasta" (urban soup) is a popular way of referring to the city's constantly changing urban substance.

14 For examples of homogenizing claims about the total or near-total destruction of Warsaw, including statistical summaries (85%–90% destroyed), see Anthony M. Tung, *Preserving the World's Great Cities: The Destruction and Renewal of the Historic Metropolis* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2001), 82; David Crowley, "People's Warsaw / Popular Warsaw," *Journal of Design History* 10 (2) 1997: 203, 205; John Radziłowski, "Remembrance and Recovery: The Museum of the Warsaw Rising and the Memory of World War II in Post-Communist Poland," *The Public Historian* 31 (4) 2009: 145; Jasper Goldman, "Warsaw: Reconstruction as Propaganda," in *The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster*, ed. Lawrence J Vale (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 135; "Historic Centre of Warsaw—UNESCO World Heritage Centre," accessed December 13, 2015, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/30>. Several of these sources cite Adolf Ciborowski, *Warsaw: A City Destroyed and Rebuilt* (Warsaw: Polonia, 1964), or Stanisław Jankowski, "Warsaw: Destruction, Secret Town Planning, 1939–1944, and Postwar Reconstruction," in *Rebuilding Europe's bombed cities*, ed. Jeffry M Diefendorf (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990). For a breakdown of phases of destruction in Warsaw, see Jan Górski, *Warszawa w latach 1944–1949: odbudowa*, ed. Stefan Kieniewicz (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1988), 78.

15 Stanisław Ossowski uses the phrase "culturally foreign" (kulturalnie obca) to describe the attitude that Polish residents of Warsaw had towards the city's primarily Jewish northern district, see "Odbudowa Warszawy w świetle zagadnień społecznych," in *Dzieła: Z zagadnień psychologii społecznej*, vol. 3 (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1967), 395.

16 The walls surrounding the Warsaw Ghetto shifted throughout the war. Certain areas were excluded from the ghetto still during the war and, as a consequence, urban fabric in these areas has partially survived until today. The most complete destruction took place north of the former Leszno Street (now Aleja Solidarności). For de-

tailed maps of shifting ghetto borders, see map inserts in Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

17 Jerzy Elżanowski, "Ruin Conversions: Violence, Architecture and Commemoration in Post-1944 Warsaw," (PhD dissertation, Bauhaus University Weimar and The University of British Columbia, 2014), 186. Some of the buildings left partially standing included the 'Gęsiówka' and 'Pawiak' prisons (the former was later demolished), as well as the Church of St. Augustine.

18 Damage Survey Map of Warsaw, 1945–46(?), Archiwum Państwowe w Warszawie, Biuro Odbudowy Stolicy, 72/25/1040/08-74.

19 Ella Chmielewska, "Vectors of Looking: Reflections on the Luftwaffe's Aerial Survey of Warsaw, 1944," in *Seeing From Above: The Aerial View in Visual Culture*, ed. Mark Dorrian and Frédéric Pousin, (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013): 227–248, 239.

20 Ibid.

21 For an expanded version of this argument, see Elżanowski 2014, "Ruin Conversions," 78 (n. 17).

22 Chmielewska, "Vectors," 239 (n. 19).

23 For a description of the property restitution debate in Poland, see Marek Jan Chodakiewicz and Dan Currell, "Restytucja: The Problems of Property Restitution in Poland," in *Poland's Transformation: A Work in Progress*, ed. Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, John Radzilowski, and Dariusz Tolczyk (Charlottesville, VA: Leopolis Press, 2003). For a critique of the neoliberal culture of exclusion in the context of urban development and urban art, see Janicka, "A Hide-out in Demo Version," 97 (n. 9).

24 For particularly striking images of the trope of home-as-violence, see Bronisław Wojciech Linke and Maria Dąbrowska, *Kamienie krzyczą* (Warszawa: Prasa, 1967).

25 For detailed studies of the Muranów housing district, see Beata Chomątowska, *Stacja Muranów* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2012); Paulina Świątek, "Building on the Ruins: The Muranów District in Warsaw," *Bulletyn Polskiej Misji Historycznej*, (7) 2012. For descriptions of rubble construction units and the manufacturing process, see Eugeniusz Olszewski, "Konkurs na zużytkowanie gruzu," *Skarpa Warszawska*, November 28, 1945, 8; K.W. Tyszka, *Inżynieria i Budownictwo* 5 (1–2) February 1948: 3.

26 The socialist realist decoration was added after the project was complete. The plastering completely obscured the intended memorial function of the exposed rubble blocks.

27 For reflections on the disposition of rubble and on Warsaw's anthropogenic stratum, see "To, co nad ziemią, zależy od tego, co pod ziemią," in *Chwała miasta* (The Glory of the City), ed. Bogna Świątkowska (Warszawa: Fundacja Będ Zmiana, 2012), LII–LIII.

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2 Photograph by Barbara Kaniewska. Courtesy POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

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4 Photograph by Simone De Iacobis.