

WE, THE PEOPLE FROM THE BURNT-DOWN VILLAGES

One grandfather's neighbour informs the militia of the partisans' forest hideout, because it's an either-or situation: he may be denounced otherwise. 'Bury' murders a grandmother because it's an either-or situation: if he does not kill, he may be killed. The sons and grandchildren remember, yet "the quieter you are, the further you get". It's all too complicated, so it's easier to make do with shouting "Honour and glory to the heroes".

Katarzyna Bonda in conversation with Paweł Smoleński.

Katarzyna Bonda – born 1977, novelist and researcher, nominated for the High Calibre Award – Poland's most prestigious prize for crime fiction. She's a former courthouse reporter and journalist. All of her six published novels have become best-sellers. The first to introduce the role of criminal profiler to Polish crime fiction - a new character archetype, who - as a criminologist - works on establishing a killer's psychological portrait. In Bonda's latest book *Okularnik* [The white Mercedes], troubled profiler Sasza Załuska arrives in Hajnówka to sort out her private life, only to become entangled in a local crime story, with Poland's post-war history in the background.



Paweł Smoleński: You dedicated *The White Mercedes* to your grandmother.

Katarzyna Bonda: I was named Katarzyna in her honour. Up until my 37th birthday, I subscribed to the family story that grandma had been shot from a tank by a German soldier.

When I decided to write a crime novel set in the Podlasie region of Poland, I went to Hajnówka, my hometown. I always collect precise information when working on a book. I need to see the real-life places I'll lay the bodies, talk to locals to fit my completely fictitious storyline into an existing reality, so that I am able to build my characters. And through these conversations I first heard about the so-called 'Bury' case. I had spent my whole life Hajnówka up to the point I left for university, which is enough to hear this-and-that about one's local and family history, but nothing of this scale. 'Bury'? I had no idea what that meant.

But you did know you're a Belarusian Pole?

How? My parents attended Orthodox church, as many people would in Hajnówka, so that wasn't anything out of the ordinary. I went to a Belarusian secondary school I chose over the Polish one due to its higher rating, better language labs and a solid volleyball team I wanted to join. I did not know the language, nor the alphabet, I had to learn everything from scratch. This Belarusian identity was out there, but once I moved out of Hajnówka, it ceased to be of any importance to me.

It was only when I started to work on *The White Mercedes* that I started to seek out Orthodox Christians. Everything seemed new, strange and scary. Various Podlasie puzzles I remembered from my childhood years started making sense. However, I still did not see any personal connection in all of this. I felt a vibrating tension in my birthplace, but I was just excited to give my

book this great new edge. These things work well in crime stories.

However, the longer I talked to the locals, the more convinced I became that stories about 'Bury' were not a thing of the past. I learned that the murders committed in 1946 were kept secret until the mid-90s. Everyone knew, but chose to stifle the truth. I met a man who was only able to organise exhumations of some of Bury's victims in the mid-1990s. He warned me that there were battle lines drawn between the Poles and the Belarusians in Podlasie.

It was this very man who referred me to the Białystok chapter of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN). I read the files and found names of villages 'pacified' by Bury. Zaleszany and Wólka Wygonowska, where my grandmother was from, were both listed!

I still did not understand, but the pieces had started to fall into place. One night, after a session of reading and another round of conversations, as I was heading back to my lodgings in the heart of the Białowieża Forest when I had an epiphany: What German tank? My grandmother had been murdered by Poles.

Suddenly I realised that I'm Belarusian. I remembered how I would contest my history teachers' routine claims that the 1569 Union of Lublin had been a partition of Belarus, even though the country had not existed in the 16th century, or that Thaddeus Kościuszko was a Belarusian, even though he identified himself as a Pole, and Orthodox religion did not determine someone's nationality at the time...

As I was walking through that dark forest it became obvious to me that both my high-school confidence I had had in my own Polishness, and in the need to defend it against claims that Kościuszko was actually Belarusian, were all a sham. I saw the complexity of the matter.

And I was furious at my parents for not telling me.

Why had they never said anything?

Out of tremendous fear. Interests, biographies, dependencies, connections; all these things are intertwined in Podlasie, nothing is simple or unequivocal. To give you an example – a lot is said and written locally about ‘red Hajnówka’. This isn’t entirely false, as many prominent members of local authorities used to work for the communist security services in the People’s Republic of Poland. Democracy failed to cleanse them, and instead preserved the existing relations. This is just skimming the surface, a single knot out of the whole cluster.

Reds, Polish nationalists and Belarusian nationalists all live next to each other in Hajnówka. These divisions cut across families because of mixed marriages. Dad holds the side of one group, his son is with the other; mum attends Orthodox Church, her daughter is a ‘real Pole’. Communist-era establishment on the one hand, silence since wartime on the other; both lead to riddles and enforced certain codes of conduct. Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, some new organisations pretending to be partisans, militants preparing for war with God-knows-who, wall inscriptions calling for “Poland for Poles” and, “Belarus for Belarussians”... Historical memory and national identity are completely incongruous and very often not in line with the facts. And yet, everything is described as if it was as simple as ABC.

If you live in Hajnówka, you have a map in your head allowing you to move around in comfort and safety. In bigger cities you may aggravate someone and nothing happens, but in small-town Hajnówka, there’s conflict on all possible fronts. It’s always been like this. My parents believed it would be better for me to grow up Polish.

What did you do with the knowledge of your family’s past?

I went straight to my mum, who asked me not to, God forbid, write anything about Hajnówka, not a word about the past. I responded: “What’s the problem? We live in a free country now.” “You’ve left Hajnówka, so for you it’s simple. I have to live here,” she retorted.

What aspect of Podlasie’s past keeps resonating until today?

All of them. The ‘Doomed Soldiers’ from communist times, who are now seen as heroes - heroic militia officers from communist times who are now ‘doomed’ to be on the wrong side of the barricade, although they might not necessarily have been all that bad. Collaboration with the Polish underground state during wartime, and with the communist authorities afterwards. Betrayal, on everyday human level, but also calls for the incorporation of the region into the Soviet Union, crime, dirty tricks, slander, theft. That’s life – nothing is as it seems. The time was warped, and so people tried to adapt. And with normal conversation impossible, everything would freeze.

In those times, ethnic cleansing went along denominative divisions. In the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance I read eyewitness testimonies from people who had survived the pogroms organised by Romuald Rajs’ (Bury’s) partisans - they would only ask the victim’s religion, as this was the easiest way to classify the local population. Christian Orthodox were lined up against the walls, Catholics were spared. Under communism, the security services would go by the opposite rule.

Simple classification fails here. Some Belarusians did collaborate with the communists, some were even willing to live under Soviet rule and report on the forest partisan units. Yet the case in point was neither Orthodox nor Belarusian identity, but a peasant’s tie to his land. Peasants

would support anyone who could ensure their survival and let them stay where they were. These people did not consider themselves Belarusian, they saw themselves as local. They did not want to leave for the Soviet Union, despite being blackmailed to do so by resistance fighters who wandered in from the Vilnius area, and in spite of the alternate threats and incentives from the authorities – it should be noted that Polish communists struck a deal with the Soviets to have the latter ‘take over’ the Belarusians. If need be – let the USSR come here.

And so Belarusians both supported the new communist regime and fought against it. The communist Poland’s government was at a loss as to what to do with them.

Enter Romuald ‘Bury’ Rajs, who is fighting communists and their Russian Orthodox allies. The war is still waging, no one has the time or the will to get into the nitty-gritty details.

In a sense, Bury’s activity is very convenient for Poland’s communist regime. Bury’s ethnic cleansing and pogroms did what the reds couldn’t do themselves. Through Bury’s hands, the communists could implement their goal of ridding Poland of Belarusians.

Let’s examine what this meant in practice. Rajs raids Hajnówka, but an informant in his unit reveals the plans for the attack. And so the partisans take a beating and are forced to retreat. The unit is losing blood, its members are angry, scared and eager for revenge. They capture 50 cart drivers to evacuate their wounded. They later kill the cart drivers and burn down Orthodox villages as retribution. But what I find truly horrifying is that Bury’s defeated unit is not chased by anyone, even though the authorities know they could easily finish him off. Rajs commits the murders, but the communists allow these massacres to happen.

It is still unclear who gave Rajs away and who decided against chasing him down. We also do not know who the communist agent in the local underground movement was, the other possibility is that someone sabotaged the chase.

People must have talked about it for all these years.

Just not in the open. They did talk about the suspects, about the children of the suspects – as the ‘like father, like son’ rule applies here. Or grandson, for that matter. The conflict between memory and the present is hidden in whispers and words uttered under the breath. I’m almost 40 and I am part of the third generation living with these secrets. The fourth generation has already come of age, yet the atmosphere remains unchanged, with the exception that you can now do more and have better opportunities in life.

How is it possible that, for decades of realist socialism, a crime committed by people the communist regime condemned as bandits was kept under wraps?

Because no one is completely clean. The regime could win over the Belarusian village they had initially intended to resettle; all they needed to do was to bring in one washing machine for all the residents to use. A Catholic from an Orthodox village denounced his neighbours – falsely or not – as informants to the Polish underground. The neighbours were murdered, and this man married his one true love, the only girl who survived the pogrom, and then moved into the house of his murdered in-laws. What do you do with all this?

Search for nuances, contexts and always remember when it happened, and what the conditions of those times were like.

Hence my visits and asking around. I saw that, in many local communities, the past is still alive. I learned that there had been further similar crimes, that there are more graves. Not everything is included in the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, but everyone knows there are human remains buried somewhere on the edge of the forests and every once in a while a dog digs up a human bone. Someone wants to put up a cross, or build a roadside chapel, others protest: "Let it be, don't get us involved in this, this will only cause trouble." After all, there are more important matters than one's conscience. *Тіше ёдешь – дальше б'удешь* (*Tishe edesh, dalshe budesh* – the quieter you are, the further you get). No one holds fixed views in Podlasie. People want to survive, and so they are fickle.

This is why Polish nationalism is alive and kicking here. Young Belarusians are not unlike I was in the past: "I don't want to be a Belarusian, a Russki, or a coward who never organised any uprising, someone who never resisted. I want to be Polish". Girls and boys with Belarusian last names join nationalist paramilitary groups, carry banners reading "Poland for Poles". To them, Bury is a hero.

To many other Poles as well. He fought against the communists, the rest is not important. But there is always this 'rest'. Nowhere else in the world could partisans, outlaws, hiding in the forest be crystal clear.

If we rid Bury of his politics, pledges to the free Catholic Poland, and the reading of death verdicts in the name of the Polish Republic, we would see a man who reached a point of no return. A man who is now the victim, and not the master, of his own fate. He must kill, because he instinctively feels he must save himself. He leads his unit fully aware that unless he is the killer, he will be killed himself; after all, reporting to the communist

security service and declaring it time to bury the hatchet and start negotiating is totally out of the question. He must be tough and remain strictly disciplined, any offence is punished with a bullet in the guilty man's head. Bury was a runaway, defending himself until he reached a point of no return. And if this entails the death of someone's grandmother, for example mine? You see the universal mechanism of winding up on a dead-end street.

There's a fine line between lawfulness and unlawfulness, even in situations less complicated than Poland's in 1946. A roguish approach to history entails applying convenient political labels and denying the existence of anything inconvenient. 'Doomed soldiers' must always be valiant and just. But shush-shush about Belarusians reporting to militia about the forest partisans.

On the one hand, some people will claim that the post-war Polish underground was nothing more than a group of outlaws; but on the other 'Bury's' partisans are commemorated on plaques that hang in churches throughout Podlasie. No need to reflect on anything, simplistic ideology that hammers 'only correct views' into our heads is all that matters. These views are needed here and now. Under favourable circumstances, you can eliminate the enemy branded by the deeds of past generations in a quiet, deceitful way. Someone will unexpectedly lose their job, they will furtively be stripped of some of their rights; no accusations are levelled at anyone. Just like in communist times.

To create one of the characters in *The White Mercedes*, I compiled a few real-life biographies. I have no sympathy for my ultra-nationalist character, but I can understand him. He is screwed, as he has been publicly 'outed' and labelled a fascist. But he was screwed even before that: he lost his seat on the town council, lost his job, then his wife lost her job too. There is nothing

worse than being unemployed in a town like Hajnówka. The guy is in a quandary, trying to save his dignity, so he becomes a 'hanger-on' to 'Bury's' legacy and forms a paramilitary group that has young people running around the forest. This group is supposedly the new Polish 'lost generation', unmarred by communism. He may have become a fascist, but he used to be normal. Personally, I have no respect for his kind of views, but I do respect the man behind them, because he refuses to be denigrated. If he had not been through a hard-knock life, he would have been a different man.

Just to make myself clear: Podlasie is by no means unique. There is nothing unequivocal about places where history, religions and cultures had once intertwined. I experienced for myself how an ordinary family can feel the impact of a tiny fraction of History, with a capital "H". That's why I do not feel capable of judging others and their attitudes.

There are different burdens of injustice we could all carry; we choose those that suit us best.

When I travelled to meetings with readers from Podlasie, I would have nationalist Poles in attendance. They would announce on their websites that some pussy dares taint the memory of the 'doomed soldiers' and needs to be set straight. Generally nothing terrible ever happened, but on two occasions I had the heebie-jeebies because of the number of loud and aggressive partisan-playing youths. They were bored out of their minds, as the meetings offered no opportunity for them to get violent, so ultimately they would all leave. They helped me understand that, to them, 'Bury' is a profile picture on social media, a computer game character. They know nothing about him, but still they think they know better.

Once a leader of one such paramilitary group lingered in the meeting

room. We had a one-to-one conversation. First it felt like polishing concrete: I said that my own innocent grandma and many others like her were killed, whilst he insisted it was a fight for Poland. I changed my tone and arguments and opted for a more humane aspect. I told him how the Belarusians had murdered 'Bury's' brother and denounced him to the Russians and the secret service – that obvious things are, by default, never obvious. His jaw dropped – to him, 'Bury' was an avatar, a term with no context. And suddenly he tells me that his mates rejected him because of his 'Semitic' nose. "Oh fuck", I thought to myself, "this is getting interesting." And then he says honestly: "I started to imagine I have a nose like this during wartime. What would I have done then?"

These boys, these nationalist loudmouths, are often mere hooligans, but are also exploited victims of smartass cynics who try to explain the world to these lost young souls. Freedom, and the vagueness it entails, is too hard for these lads. And because they have not benefited much from it, they choose order over freedom. This gives them high self-esteem, as they are fighting for the history of their homeland. And then the tenacity and solid character, even of a criminal, are always awe-inspiring.

I was shown recordings from meetings of young people with members of Bury's unit. I was under the impression they all imagined themselves to be similar to these partisans. And then you see a real partisan's home: extreme poverty, no toilet or running water, total powerlessness. And in your mind you are never powerless, you find the culprits and defeat the enemy – whoever that might be. In this case a Russian Communist, but it could just as well be a Muslim, redhead, fatso or baldie.

There is this boiling rage in the Polish nation. So the impressionable ones get led by the nose, while the con artists reap the benefits.

IN THE STATE OF HIGHER NECESSITY

Romuald Rajs, codename 'Bury', b. 1913, had been a soldier almost his entire life. He was 16 when he enrolled at the Non-Commissioned Officers' School for Minors, then he went on to Officer Cadets' School and completed a parachuting course. He was stationed in the Vilnius area. In September 1939 his unit was disarmed by Belarusians.

After Poland's loss in September 1939, Rajs becomes involved in underground activities. He heads the elite 1st Commando in the Home Army's 3rd Vilnius Brigade, winning medals for his courage. In July 1944, he participates in the liberation of Vilnius. In the autumn of the same year, Rajs moves to the Białystok area and reports to the communist Polish People's Army under a false name. He becomes a second lieutenant and is charged with commanding a platoon of the State Forest Protection service in Hajnówka. In the spring of 1945, 'Bury' establishes ties with Major Zygmunt Szyndzielarz 'Łupaszka', who refused to follow the order to dissolve Home Army units and starts to re-create the Home Army's 5th Vilnius Brigade in the area of Białowieża Forest.

Rajs is a squad commander. When Szyndzielarz surrenders, 'Bury' joins the National Military Union (Narodowe Zjednoczenie Wojskowe - NZW), is upgraded to captain and heads the Special Action Rescue (Pogotowie Akcji Specjalnej - PAS) team authorised by NZW to "pacify southeastern areas of Bielsk county" and to "take revenge on civilians opposing underground activities". PAS fights militia units directly subordinate to the Polish communist secret service and NKVD.

In February 1946 'Bury's' partisans attack Hajnówka, suffering a staggering defeat. While retreating, they capture 50 Belarusian cart drivers and later murder them in a forest near Puchały. They then proceed to burn down Belarusian villages and murder residents suspected of collaborating with the communists, or openly admitting to being Orthodox. Women and children are also killed. Terrified by 'Bury's' cruelty, high command of NZW sends him a warning letter and vows to "deal with the matter in free Poland."

Rajs is granted leave and heads to Elbląg, and then Karpacz, where he tries to settle into civilian life. In November 1948 he is arrested. A kangaroo court sentences him to death. He pleads not guilty of pacification actions and the execution of communist militia, naming his deputies as the culprits.

In 1995, a military court lifts the sentence on the grounds that Rajs "fought for the existence of an independent Poland" and "acted in the state of higher necessity, entailing the making of decisions that were not always ethically clear". Opponents of this rehabilitation form the Committee for Families of Murdered Cart Drivers, demanding an investigation into the crimes of 1946.

Ten years later, the investigation is discontinued. Investigators from the Institute of National Remembrance cite the rehabilitation verdict, but in their "final investigation findings" they write: "Murder of the cart drivers and village pacifications conducted in January and February of 1946 cannot be identified as a fight for independent statehood, as they bear the marks of genocide. Bury's actions against Podlasie village residents supported the communist power apparatus through denigrating the prestige of underground organisations and supplying propaganda arguments in favour of the alleged banditry of the partisans (...) They did not conduce improving Polish-Belarusian relations (...) and spawned supporters of the idea to separate the region from Poland (...). Thus, under no circumstances should what had happened be considered the right thing to do".

Rajs' burial location remains unknown to this day.