Portrait of an Authentic Schnorrer: Abrasza Zemsz in Richard Marienstras’s Memory

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Introduction

Born in Moscow in 1919, Abrasza Zemsz was one of the many displaced non-religious Polish Jews who ended up in France after World War II. Like other refugees in the postwar period, he struggled to start a new life. He is of interest to us due to the world he inhabited; a Holocaust survivor stricken with poor health and unable to adapt to postwar French bourgeois life who simultaneously inhabited a space among a variety of postwar Parisian artists and intellectuals. An extremely gifted commentator on the art scene—including painting and cinema, literature and poetry—and intensely interested in postwar global politics, especially in France and Israel, Zemsz made a lasting impact on those with whom he came in contact.

A Polish soldier in World War II, Zemsz fought in 1948 for the future State of Israel but soon returned to Paris, where he became a student of the grammarian A.J. Greimas and the anthropologist André Leroy-Gouran. Most of all, he was close to Claude Lévi-Strauss. However, Zemsz’s weak health—a consequence of the war years and a poor diet in the immediate postwar years—prevented him from becoming an anthropologist in his own right. Nonetheless, he took part in the first archaeological missions in the caves of Lascaux. Zemsz befriended a large number of people in postwar Paris who were to become important artists, such as Francis Picabia and his daughter, and intellectuals such as Pietro Sarto, David Perlov, and Claude Olievenstein. He was well known in literary circles, socializing with and influencing Alina Szapocznikow, Emanuel “Tolek” Proweller, Richard Marienstras,1 and Adolf Rudnicki.2 Many other exiled Poles, both Jewish and non-Jewish, crossed paths with him, including Suzanne Weissfeld, Wanda Aftergut, Liliane Atlan, Bruno Durocher (Bronislaw Kaminski), and Czeslaw Milosz.

Most notable was Zemsz’s relationship with André Schwarz-Bart, author of Le Dernier des Justes (The Last of the Just). Schwarz-Bart benefited from numerous discussions with Zemsz, who introduced him to the idea of...
Zemsz did not find regular employment because he did not have the required degrees, but he did at one time teach as guest lecturer at the University of Vincennes. But he lived unmoored and became an errant in the French capital, living from many little jobs and financial and material help from a vast network of friends. He never raised a family. Ultimately, Zemsz, a man unable to create for himself a settled life after the rupture created by the war, grew more and more depressed; eventually he would bring a tragic end to his uprooted existence. He committed suicide by jumping out of the window of a hotel in Rue Feuillantines, close to la Rue Gay-Lussac, on September 8, 1979.

Zemsz was remembered by many of those who encountered him in Paris, both as an intellectual and a man struggling with the aftermath of the war. The below text explores Marienstras’s memory of him—as a man full of contradictions who decided to put an end to a life he felt was unbearable. This interview with Marienstras was conducted in Polish by Jolanta Kilian. She encountered Zemsz during her first student stay in Paris, and returned later, after his death, with the intention of writing a book on this fascinating man. Elisabeth Brami, the daughter of Emanuel Proweller, who was friends with both Zemsz and Marienstras, assisted with translation and research for this article, and kindly agreed to let us use two illustrations of paintings by her father. Irena Milewska also provided translation assistance.

Interview with Richard Marienstras

Jolanta Kilian (JK): Who was Abrasza Zemsz?

Richard Marienstras (RM): He always used to send post cards. I met him a very long time ago at the Gare de Lyon [train station in Paris] when we were leaving for Palestine, in 1948. Since then, we stayed in touch. He was an extraordinary man, but honestly, it is difficult to talk about him because he was someone who was always self-fashioning, he made himself according to his own ideas.

Each time our conversation turned out to be sort of a perpetual exploration. It is very difficult to summarize our conversations and even more difficult to reproduce those talks. Sometimes, I tried to take some notes. During his lifetime, we saw each other frequently, four or five times a week. At the time, it made no sense to write those conversations down because they were just rambling chats.

What did we talk about?

First of all, the arts, and then anthropology. He would have loved to travel and participate in different geological expeditions. He even went on
a research boat somewhere once. But his dreams never could come true because he suffered from weak health. He always had health problems and I remember that he spent over two years in a sanatorium.

The third subject of our talks was politics; politics and Judaism. Not Judaism in a cultural sense, but rather in an existential sense. He had a very intimate and intricate relationship to the Second World War. He had been in Anders’ Army,\(^8\) where his colleagues broke all of his teeth [in a fight]. Then, a few months before the end of the war, he deserted. At the start of the war, he was working in a mine in the Massif Central in France. Afterwards, he went to Spain and from there he went to England, and then he came back

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**Figure 1.** Portrait of Abrasza Zemsz by Emanuel Proweller, 1967. Oil on canvass, approximately 36” x 28”. Printed with the permission of Elisabeth Brami.
to France. It was a pretty weird situation. He ended up spinning his wheels in Paris.

I met him a little later, so I don’t know anything about what he did between 1945 and 1948. Besides, in his life, he had lots of relatives and he compartmentalized a lot of things. Extremely few of his friends and relatives knew each other enough to ever get together with each other. Usually he would say that he had met up with so-and-so or had spoken with someone else. For me, he was a really close friend. He had two close friends: Tolek Proweller, the painter, and me. But even we were isolated from each other in a way.

J.K: But he did keep notebooks. Did he want to do anything with them? Was he ever planning to publish them someday?

RM: It is a mystery. He lived everything in such an intense way that there was probably no way for him to settle down a little, and to start thinking about getting his writing together and organized. He was changing subjects all the time. If you were used to his style of conversation, it was not surprising; however, all of the things he would bring up were surprising. We spoke to each other in Polish.
JK: What was the goal of those conversations?
RM: They were based on a certain connection to history, in the tradition of Malraux. Malraux was for all of us a sort of “neo-culturalist.” Zemsz seemed like a character who had jumped out of one of Malraux’s books. First, he had his connection to history, to communism. Before the war, when he was about sixteen years old, he was a communist. He came from a middle-class family and he was probably a little bit of a crazy bourgeois who came from a good, non-religious, Jewish family. He had leftist opinions. Really, however, he wasn’t like the rest of us. He was not actually leftist when in a way the rest of us in our little group were. He wasn’t truly leftist for three reasons: 1) he knew what communism meant, 2) he repeated endlessly the totality of the Jewish experience, 3) and finally, he had a connection to art as an expression of the last traces of eternity.

Those were very complex opinions. When he talked about things, he always combined those three aspects. In a certain way, he mixed all of those things; that was why he had always a special, original, and exceptional take on almost everything. On top of that, you had structuralism, which he sort of disagreed with, because he himself had an essential connection to history whereas structuralism completely denied any historical relationships.

JK: It took things out of context . . . .
RM: Exactly, that was his foundation and he would use everything that he could to analyze, let’s say, a painting. He studied a painting like it was made up of complicated elements, all contrasted and contradictory to each other. But on the other hand, he never forgot that, in a way, the painting was the expression of a certain history, either a personal history, or the history of art, or of events.

JK: Nothing should be de-contextualized.
RM: Indeed. And that is exactly what his foundation with Claude Lévi-Strauss, who he knew, was all about. He argued with him from time to time. That was how he functioned. That was his way of life and of discussion: one eternal surprise.

He was extremely sensitive to art, to people, and sensitive to what someone might have lived through at some point and in which way this changed them. This sensitivity influenced, to a certain extent, how he analyzed art, his intellectual work, and his conjectures. He contemplated a lot, naturally, even about his own life, which, on a personal level, was pretty difficult. As he used to say, he was living in the margin of error and that was a difficult way to live. (Laughs) At the end of his life, he taught some classes in Nanterre, but not as a teacher, not with an official title.

JK: He hadn’t done any college?
RM: No, but he knew more than a lot of people who had. I suppose he had difficulty with the French language. He could improvise in French in a fantastic way, but writing, that was something else entirely. He struggled all the time. He kept a close connection with Proweller—and Proweller’s creativity—who, in my opinion, is a great painter and as far as I can tell, has never been fully recognized. He never had the fame that goes with a
great career. It was just bad luck. In the end, Abrasza and he had a big disagreement. Abrasza always had relationships of conflict with people. He fought with everyone. Not with me. Because in a circle of friends, you have to have at least one person that you get along with, otherwise you fall out of the group completely. That is probably why we never fought. He fought a lot with communists and non-communists, the whole French left wing. He pretty much knew everyone in Paris. He was like a hobo, he made the rounds to all the meetings, he was all over the place.

JK: He was overflowing with ideas?
RM: Indeed. All the people who met him were fascinated with him.
JK: He lived in hotels. He never had his own place?
RM: He never had a place of his own.
JK: Like Milosz, the syndrome of the homeless.
RM: He never had any money, never enough to get an apartment. He lived in little hotels, little holes. Sometimes he could find asylum in this or that flat rented by friends of his. Sometimes we put money aside to rent him a room, but times were very different then, not like today where it is tough to find work. Back then, you only had to make a little money, enough to live on at least. But he did not want to. He was a hobo. And he liked it. It was his own form of provocation, his own way to avoid being bourgeois. That was his obsession. The bourgeois were those who lived in comfort, owned apartments, people who wanted a normal life. Today, that way of thinking makes no sense. In rich countries, the working class doesn’t exist. Class distinctions have disappeared, whereas during the war, they were huge. In those days, owning and reading books carried a positive stigma. Abrasza wore the same Canadian jacket ever since the war and he always had around three books in each pocket as well as a few pictures of works of art. When he met someone, the first thing he would do was pull a book out of his pocket or sometimes a post card, and start up a discussion about it.

JK: He was like a character out of Jeux de classes by Julio Cortázar.11
RM: Yeah, a little, but he was by no means like a southern French, he had a completely different mentality. Tougher and more violent. A little like “Master Rameau’s cousin” (from Le Neveu de Rameau),12 and of course, the modern version, not from the eighteenth century. He was actually a little like that character out of Diderot—he loved that book, by the way. Abrasza had no home because that would have been a compromise. He figured that one should not live like that, that he had to conserve a certain “purity.”

JK: He lived his life by ideals and values.
RM: He was an exceptional man. Among the adventurous, he was sort of a special mix of all that, he was a tramp. Sentimental and intellectual at the same time, violent and offensive, an everyman Jewish adventurer. To tell the truth, he belonged more to legend than to real life. Every conversation with him was always a solemn ceremony. When he spoke with someone, not only with his close friends, he always wanted to explain his own ideas: that this opinion was worthless, and that one was valid and needed to be discussed. With him, each conversation was a radical test.
For me, no longer having him around is a huge loss. It was never a simple friendly relationship. That type of friendship was never possible with him. Sometimes it was hard to have a family and a friendship with him at the same time. I always had to be available, ready to discuss things, to drop everything for him, it didn’t matter what I was in the middle of doing. When he called on the phone, you came running. It didn’t matter if you were in the bathtub or with a woman, you had to drop everything!

We were a group of friends, people who stayed together from about 1949 until 1968. We all had somehow managed to survive the war. Most of us were of Jewish origin. We were artists, intellectuals, diverse individuals, and that group met regularly, usually at Tolek Proweller’s place. First in Paris (22 rue Léopold Bellan, 6th floor), then in Créteil, where he bought a small house and renovated it (around 1959). It was a friendship which flowed first and foremost with an intellectual fascination, love, and feeling. I remember fantastic discussion about art, when Tolek started painting in abstract style. We debated, is that allowed or not? Is that still painting or is it something more than painting? Is it good and is it worth anything?

I was involved with another group, Americans who had stayed in Paris after World War II and lived on pensions from the American government. When both groups came together, it set off conflicts of Babylonian proportions.

We went to America. When we went to Tunisia, Abrasza stayed at our place. We paid for his travel. But the trip to America was too expensive, we weren’t able to pay for him to come. He would have gone crazy there. At heart, he was so European. He always lived in a tiny room so filled with books that you could not even move around in it. He was always reading something. What, I don’t even know. He didn’t read Jewish writers from the Middle Ages or from today. He didn’t read the Bible. He was not a cultural Jew, he was an existential Jew, which is not at all the same point of view. That, too, was an obsession of his, he would say all the time “I wish I had died in the Warsaw ghetto.” That was his personal relationship to Jewishness.

We went—him and me—to Israel, right after independence was declared. In 1948, there was a war with the Arabs, which was folkloric compared to the European war. Nobody understood exactly what happened, nor did anyone know how the Jews won; it was almost comedic. We lived through several adventures. The war in 1946 was already over the first day, when they blew up the Egyptian airport (according to me and Abrasza). That first war? So folkloric!

And that mysterious departure from Marseille? Naturally, everyone knew that the French let anyone leave to participate in that war, but it was a secret, and later, on that boat . . .
JK: Who were Abrasza’s favorite authors?
RM: Dostoevsky and Malraux. Among the French authors, he liked particularly Malraux. He also read stuff that wasn’t well known. For example, he read about the Zulus. He always had those books in his pockets; no one knew where they came from or how he got them. It was always a new surprise. He lived for that. He always got a reaction out of people. He knew a lot about classic literature, but he rarely talked about it. He liked Stendhal but not Gide. He didn’t read Thomas Mann. He didn’t know any German authors. He was not interested in Antonin Artaud, he probably figured that it was too much about pathology. That doesn’t mean it was out of his league, but that it was too individualistic. He read a lot but not belles lettres. Mostly ethnologies, histories, those kinds of books.

JK: Reading brought order to life, but I don’t believe he really wanted to be part of the world.
RM: No. On the contrary. He was always against something or other, and if something was fashionable, he always distanced himself from it: “that’s no good.” I remember when he read *Chroniques italiennes* [Italian Chronicles] by Stendhal, he had a big emotional response.

I was reading Plato when we met on the way to Israel. I had it in my pocket. Right after the war, people who read were very rare so, naturally, when he saw someone with a book in his pocket, he took notice and that is how we met at the Gare de Lyon in Paris, when we were headed to where they were gathering for the departure to Palestine.

JK: Was he involved with anarchy?
RM: No, not really. He knew, of course, [Pyotor] Kropotkin but it was not his thing. To tell the truth, he knew Marxism pretty well, but more in a mysterious way. He didn’t read Marx or Lenin or any of Stalin’s propaganda. He was always picking up cigarette butts and tearing pieces off newspapers to roll his own cigarettes.

RM: He understood painting like a language, but it isn’t like a language . . . .
JK: So he was an existential [non-religious] Jew?
RM: He did not believe in God. He knew practically nothing about Jewish religion. He didn’t care about Jewish holidays. He was only Jewish by his life experience. What he had learned about Judaism was important for himself and his point of view. He came from a fully assimilated family: he didn’t speak Yiddish, and he probably could not even understand it. He could not read Hebrew either. What he knew about Judaism was learned by living around Jews.

JK: Here in Paris, for example?
RM: Yes, but here, there is a whole different dimension because in France, French Jews are French. Sometimes they are religious, but their religiosity is metabolized by French tradition and their way of being French. For him, Judaism meant Jews from Poland, Russia, Eastern Europe, not assimilated Jews in France. Jews who wanted to feel Polish, there was a difference because they knew they had no future in Poland, and that is why they preserved their defining characteristics. Abrasza came from a family and background like mine. My father disappeared into the ghetto. I barely knew him, I only rarely saw him. As a little boy I was not interested in his family, or where he came from. My mother’s parents came to Poland from the Ukraine around 1910, my grandfather was a fairly rich shopkeeper, he bought seed and owned a factory that made halva and macaroons. In my family, everyone considered themselves Jewish, but it was a Judaism that had its own identity and its own history: we were existential Jews. Naturally, my grandfather was a practicing Jew who went to the synagogue on holy days. He was a bourgeois who considered himself avant-garde. They wanted to belong to Renaissance Europe.

JK: And that was to escape those restricted Jewish horizons?

RM: Yes. They were all impoverished Jews, but still Jews anyway. It was the same way in Abrasza’s family, but a little bit richer, I suppose. In that sense, he was an existential Jew. What he had lived through, what he knew about Jews, he knew from history, not from religion.

JK: He had a sort of nonchalant relationship with tradition?

RM: Absolutely. He knew his existence, but it was not his thing. He was, really, a cosmopolitan Jew. His place was Europe. During our time in Israel, he suffered a lot. He felt like it was a restrictive country.

JK: Can we say that he reconstructed his identity, as in: without respecting or founding it on his family’s tradition?

RM: Yes.

JK: Could you elaborate on this?

RM: Well, he realized that he came from a very ancient tradition, one of the oldest in Europe. The details of that tradition were not so important considering actual Judaism. I will put it this way: because he figured that all of creation, in a way, was his “property.”

JK: He was comfortable with that?

RM: Yes, he was like that with everything. But sometimes he could react very violently, almost brutally, any time he detected any antisemitism. He had had a lot of pretty bad experiences. That was pretty typical of the little circle we found ourselves in right after the war. It was important that we remain Jewish, but the most important thing was that we had all survived the war by fighting: Abrasza in the Army of Anders, Tolek in the Soviet army, and me, when I was sixteen, I joined the French Resistance. We were united by a certain historical consciousness and the reasons for our choices.

Some things, for us, were completely normal, which differentiated us from other French intellectuals. They didn’t have the knowledge of Eastern Jews. For them, it was completely incomprehensible. They didn’t under-
stand that in Poland the Jewish community could represent a nationality rather than a religion. In France, no one else understood that either. Nowadays, if you see Jews on TV dressed in characteristic fashion, you immediately think they are religious. People don’t understand that Jewish dress is the product of a civilization. For us, that was normal. And one other thing, the fact that we were Jews was tied strongly to the war and the fate of Jews in Europe.

JK: And it was in that way that you were talking about Abrasza’s relationship with history?

RM: Sure. By the way, everyone who had a part in that war lived a rare historic moment, comparable to the Russian Revolution or the Spanish Civil War. That was one reason why we went to Israel. We had the impression then that the Arabs were going to destroy the country as well as the couple hundred thousand Jews who lived there as a minority population. To go to Israel at that time was an opportunity to find yourself again at a moment when the weight of history was bearing down hard. And that was why Abrasza always said he wished he had died in the Warsaw ghetto. Because that was a moment when the weight of history was bearing down at its maximum point and the extermination of European Jews for him, for us, was a fundamental phenomenon that we realized went way beyond comprehension.

I remember that André Schwarz-Bart was part of our circle, he was preparing Le Dernier des Justes. We talked with him while he was writing one of the five different versions. Abrasza told him, “You don’t have the right to write about people being sent to the crematory furnace. That’s a blind moment that no one has the right to write about.” With us, it was a blind area of consciousness. Nowadays that has become commonplace. Lots of people describe it and they describe it poorly. Notably, it is among American experts and among scholars in Europe too, there’s a lot, a lot of discussion about it. In France, ideological discussions go nowhere, discussion about that historical phenomenon which lies, in a way, beyond human history. It was a phenomenon that, in a way, cannot even enter the frame of any normal historical process.

Put another way, to explain it like a historical phenomenon is a way to justify it, which is impossible. There is no similar precedent and it cannot be explained. It was an event in the most basic sense of the word, and an event in its most basic meaning has no way of being explained. It is sort of a phenomenon without cause, an inconceivable phenomenon and as such, you can use it to explain other things, but there is nothing you can use to explain it. That awareness, if that’s what it is, was ours from the very start. I remember when we had played around with the idea of publishing a little newspaper for the UEJF (Union of Jewish students of France). One time, I wrote up a page about the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto, and Abrasza helped me write a good introduction, which said that the Jews had died in the absolute silence of the world. Nobody was talking like that in 1955, because the public consciousness, usually quantitative, was not clear. After
that, slowly, people began to understand the enormity of the phenomenon. We could not explain it to ourselves.

This photo from 1912 shows the crowd participating in the burial of Elias Maisel in Lodz. I have seen other photos where there were huge crowds of Jews, like in the Bund protest. They don’t have any idea how big a phenomenon the Jews were, in this part of Europe, before the war. Not in countries like France, of course. Abrasza’s friends each would explain that in their own way.

Michal Borowicz was a figure in the Polish socialist party, close to the first president of Poland after the war. He was one of the rare Jews to be part of the AK [Armia Krajowa], and even more, to have a position of responsibility. Later, he left Poland and came to Paris. He published a lot, among other things, an article about the dreams and religions of those condemned to die during the Occupation. He wrote a short history of the insurrection in the Warsaw ghetto. He was a good friend of ours. Piotr Rawicz was also one of Abrasza’s friends. During that time, he was a correspondent for TA [Polish press agency]. He would tell us what he wrote for Poland. For example, that he saw women who had to peel their potatoes in the Paris metro because it was too cold in their apartments. It was funny. He had to show that it was going terribly for capitalist countries and so he invented stories like that about life in Paris at the time. I don’t remember when he came to Paris exactly. Life was hard at the time for an average worker.

JK: Did you and your friends ever think about doing something together, like a revolution? What did you put your energy into?

RM: Tolek painted, Abrasza made the rounds of different intellectual circles in Paris, and he needed a lot of energy for his diverse conversations, I wrote. What revolution? We were already living post-revolution. We knew what communist regimes were all about. We might have been able to start a leftist revolution. We were leftists, naturally, but who would we have started this revolution with? The French communist party was the worst in Europe. It was not possible.

JK: But did you dream about a different world or was it just to go along with your sense of history?

RM: A different world? It was our world. We didn’t think it was that horrible. For many reasons, it wasn’t that great (it was postwar conditions, after all), but people were thinking about building a society where everything would be a little better. Everyone was engaged in some way and there was no reason to have a larger political project.

In 1968, Abrasza was going all around Paris and the rest of us were, too. We were no longer twenty year olds and we knew that it was becoming a parody, an imitation of revolution. It was fun and it changed a lot of things in this country, things that were not obvious. France, as a society, was terribly blocked: the colonial power of the army was the subject of our complex discussions. We had never thought, like Sartre for example, that it was a real enemy of revolution. We did not believe that in the movement for Algerian liberation. Because we were former terrorists, we could not accept that...
grenades were falling on unarmed civilians, on children and women at the beach. For us, that was barbaric. That kind of thing is happening right now in Rwanda. So, we were right. We were all living within a certain margin of error. We could not sympathize with those kind of acts.

JK: Who was Abrasza, then, beyond a good friend and a guy you could have deep conversations with?

RM: He was God’s wanderer. A character that can’t be summed up in just a few words, what we call in Jewish folklore the “schnorrer,” full of “wits.”

Notes

1 Richard Marienstras (1928–2011) was an internationally renowned scholar and writer, perhaps best known for Shakespeare: la royauté et le pouvoir (1964) and Shakespeare: le lieu théâtral à l’époque élisabéthaine (1964). He taught English Literature at the University of Paris VII, Sorbonne, and was a founder and president of the “Cercle Gaston Crémieux,” a Jewish association that championed harmonic compatibility between members on a national and cultural basis. Founder of the journal Diasporiques, Marienstras stressed “diasporisme” (diasporism), or the dissemination of the Jews globally, as his key concept. He authored seminal essays such as Etre un peuple en diaspora, which includes a chapter about an early version of André Schwarz-Bart’s Le Dernier des Justes. As a close friend of Abrasza Zemsz and an acquaintance of Schwarz-Bart, Marienstras witnessed the many changes the manuscript of the Goncourt-Prize-winning novel underwent, in which he and other Jewish friends such as Zemsz played a significant role. After retiring from the Sorbonne, Marienstras continued to work and lecture, often in collaboration with his wife, Elise Marienstras, a historian who specializes in the study of US minorities. See Etre un peuple en diaspora (Paris: François Maspéro, 1975; Paris: Éd. Amsterdam, 2014); Philippe Lazar, “Richard Marienstras, inoubliable pionnier du ‘diasporisme,’” Diasporiques 14 (June 2017): 22–28.

2 Cf. Chwila w kamieniu, Kupiec łódzki, and Niebieskie kartki.

3 Schnorrer is a Yiddish term meaning “beggar” or “one who reaches out; a miser, a trickster.” It is from the verb “shnorren,” meaning “to beg” or “to borrow.” See Leo Rosen, Les joies du Yiddish (Paris : Calmann-Levy, 1994), 385. Régine Robin noted that Joseph Roth (1894–1939), the Austrian novelist who wrote The Radetzky March, “defines himself as a Schnorrer, the beggar and traditional parasite of Ashkenazi Jewish culture, this which immediately puts him in the destiny of the Jewish community and, at the same time, keeps him away from them. He is both proud to be an Eastern Jew and a poor Jew, though he constantly exaggerates, not his money difficulties at the moment he writes to Stephan Zweig, but the poverty of his childhood.” Régine Robin, “La politique imaginaire de Joseph Roth,” Etudes littéraires 31.3 (Winter 1995): 32. Translation by Kathleen Gyssels.

4 Jolanta Kilian is a playwright, documentary producer, researcher, and writer. She earned an MA at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland with a thesis entitled, “Jewish Mysticism in the paintings of Marc Chagall.” She was awarded the Jerzy Giedroyc Fund to Support Independent Literature and Polish Science scholarship (Paris) and a private scholarship at the University of Jerusalem and Israeli public libraries. Her work has been published in journals such as Czas Kultury; IMAGES: The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts, and Audiovisual Communication; and pARTisan, among others. Her plays and documentaries include Transit, a play selected by Eurodram in Paris (2015); “The Time of Three Tortoises” (2007), “Almaz” (2013); “From Call to Call” (2014); and “The Blue Waltz” (2014). She explored theater and cultural anthropology in a lecture series, “Theatre that Participates in History,” in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan (2004–2015). She is currently chairwoman of “Stowarzyszenie Młodych Twórców—Ku Teatrowi” (The Association of Young Artists—Toward Theater). She lives in Poznań, Poland.
5 Kilian interviewed people who knew Zemsz and were willing to talk about his life and work. Her research is centered around Zemsz’s concepts, ethnological and artistic interests, cosmopolitanism, attitude to Judaism, and mysticism.

6 Elisabeth Brami, born in Warsaw, Poland, the daughter of Shoah survivors, is a clinical psychologist and author. She has published over 100 books, for both children and adults. Her most recent work is Croire au matin: Cinq écrivains à la rencontre de Charles Palant, rescapé d’Auschwitz (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2018). Her father was painter Emanuel Proweller (1918–1981). She regularly speaks as a writer and psychologist; for her, literature has no age limit and many essential effects, like psychoanalytic work. She lives in Paris with her husband and three children.

7 Irena Milewska was born in Czestochowa, Poland, and survived the Warsaw ghetto. She recently published Orpheline polonaise en quête de famille, an autobiographical novel. She was a founding member of The Children of the Holocaust Association. She lives in Paris.

8 Anders’ Army was the informal name for the Polish Armed Forces in the East, a division created by the Soviet Union in 1941.


10 He seems to be referring to Paris West University Nanterre La Défense, located in Nanterre, a Paris suburb.


12 Le Neveu de Rameau (The Second Satire) is a dialogue written by Denis Diderot undoubtedly between 1762 and 1773, and published in 1805. It is about morals and a satire on the morals of that time through a dialogue between Me, the narrator, philosopher, and Jean-François Rameau, nephew of the famous composer Jean-Philippe Rameau.

13 The Armia Krajowa (Polish Home Army) was a clandestine force with approximately four hundred thousand members, under the direction of the Polish government in exile. It was the largest part of the Polish resistance and organized on behalf of civilians, including for schools, universities, and social welfare. It helped Jews during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April 1943. But some Polish Home Army soldiers perpetrated crimes against the Jews.