

“The Explosion”, Chapter 1. (English translation). - from a book (in polish) “TAJEMNICZA RANA” by Łukasz Mieszkowski, (provided by the author, sent by Ana Wajszczuk from Buenos Aires)

I. The Explosion

The only way to know what took place in the restaurant on the 107th Floor of the North Tower, World Trade Center on September 11th 2001 is to invent it.

Frédéric Beigbeder, *Windows on the World (1)*

1.

Those who survived did not remember the explosion.

Every explosion, and especially the accompanying noise, is so sudden and terrifying that the human organism reacts automatically to it based on a preservation reflex. Interpreting it correctly as a danger, it tries to increase its chance of survival by instinctively protecting the most vital organs: the brain, heart and lungs. An impulse runs through the body, a sudden shiver. People hunch their shoulders and contract their bodies to reduce exposure to potential injuries. In an attempt to create a protective barrier, muscles flex and harden, while blood pressure rises sharply. The rush of blood to the head can cause short-term loss of consciousness, but an episode of amnesia lasting just a few seconds is more common. One remembers what happened before and after, but not during. The blast of a firecracker or the roar of a motorcycle engine will not trigger such a reaction, as the organism behaves in such a way only in extreme situations. That is exactly what this situation was. The most extreme of all.

(1) Frédéric Beigbeder, Windows on the World.

On 13 August 1944, a few minutes after 6 p.m., an explosion took place on the corner of two streets in Warsaw’s Old Town. It was powerful even by the standards of World War II material warfare – over twice the magnitude as the explosions caused by the heaviest aerial bombs dropped on Warsaw, stronger than any explosion the city had witnessed since the start of the Uprising on 1 August 1944. The blast was caused by a nearly half-tonne load of the pulverizing explosive TNT. What is even more horrifying, it took place in the middle of a dense, cheering crowd.

In a one-hundred-thousandth of a second, in the epicentre of the explosion, huge masses of released energy formed a fireball with a temperature of three thousand degrees Celsius. This was accompanied by the release of enormous amounts of dark, acrid smoke. The blast pressed with unstoppable force into a space already filled with air, initially creating a

pressure several thousand times higher than the force of the Earth's atmosphere. The mass of hot air and fumes pushed by the blast created a shockwave spreading out concentrically at over Mach 20, 25,000 kilometres per hour. Failing to keep up, the accompanying acoustic effect – a deafening thunder – followed at a distance.

The first people hit by the wave were less than a metre away. They ceased to exist, all signs of their physical presence being ground to bits and incinerated between the mill wheels of compressed gases and fire. Those standing within five metres from the epicentre were immediately torn to pieces by the high-pressure blast. Apart from the temperature and pressure, their remains – mainly skeletal fragments, but also durable elements of clothing, such as buttons, buckles, military eagles – together with stones, rubble, splinters of glass and metal picked up from the ground by a surge of air, created yet another destructive, lethal factor – a storm of shrapnel shot in all directions at supersonic speed.

People standing more than five metres away, who constituted the majority of the victims of the explosion, may have seen a flash before they died. The temperature and force of the air masses may have weakened several hundred times before they reached them, but they still caused instantaneous death. The pressure tore off limbs, tore apart blood vessels, pulmonary alveoli and brain cells, the heat burned bodily surfaces and the respiratory system. Great damage was done by the ricocheting, off-kilter shrapnel, which somersaulted inside human bodies causing horrible injuries. The flash that lasted fractions of a second and the spreading roar eclipsed the smaller, yet equally deadly explosions of grenades and ammunition of soldiers who were among the victims. The blast reached the walls of tenement houses, ironing into them the people standing nearby. The walls caved in by as much as several dozen centimetres, shook, but endured the blast, unlike the balconies, which came down together with the people standing on them, and the windows, which were ripped out together with their frames. In the gateway to one of the buildings, a storeroom full of Molotov cocktails exploded, drowning the people inside in a sea of flames.

The effects of the explosion then reached those people who were standing ten, twenty metres away from the epicentre. Their fate was the most harrowing of all – major injuries caused by shrapnel, second- and third degree burns. Some of the wounded died within the next few seconds or minutes of shock and blood loss. Others suffered in long agony in makeshift hospitals without proper medical care, dressings or analgesics. Those who stood further away had a greater chance of survival, but even they were hit by the squall of hot air and rain of shrapnel, which included charred pieces of human flesh and severed limbs, leaving many of them badly hurt, or at best stripped of their clothes and knocked to the ground. Barring those individuals who were inside tenement houses, protected by walls, anyone at a radius of 200 metres fell victim to the explosion, too, either physically injured or in shock and unable to think logically.

The wave of temperature and fire immediately spread away from the epicentre, creating a vacuum that immediately filled again with air. This instantly created another blast moving in the opposite direction, back to the epicentre; although not as strong and hot as the first one, it was still dangerous. The blast sucked the human remains and shrapnel remaining in the air into a cloud of smoke and flames, tore battered people out of gates and windows on all floors and hurled them against the cobblestone street, covering it with their bruised bodies and a rain of shards of broken glass. It took a while before the energy created by the explosion stopped moving around the masses of air and gas, as well as the dust, burning bits of tissue, hair, clothes and paper floating in them. The surrounding atmosphere pulsated, contracting and expanding, losing force, speed and temperature with each cycle. Soon, the only remaining effect of the explosion, except for omnipresent destruction, death and suffering, was a cloud of thick black smoke suffused with the smell of cadavers; it filled the entire canyon of the street, turning the sunny day to a dark, suffocating night. It all lasted less than a second. (2)

2.

The survivors neither noticed nor could remember or recount the event. Most of them did not learn that an explosion had taken place until much later, after they regained consciousness and shook off the shock. They described the moment of the explosion as a blinding flash followed by darkness and the sensation of sinking into an abyss. Just before losing consciousness, one witness experienced the sensation of a bomb exploding in

(2) The description of the explosion is based on an interview conducted by the author on 16 January 2013 with deputy inspector Zbigniew Pluciak, former national police coordinator for explosive materials and pyrotechnics with the Board of Counter-Terrorism Operations of the National Police Headquarters.

his stomach, (3). while another witness, who was safe inside a tenement house, remembered a long-lasting *huge acoustic shock [...] and sensation of unthinkable horror* (4). In their testimonies, all the witnesses used suggestive, contradictory terms. The flash was followed by darkness, with thunder replaced by deathly silence. The non-existence and murkiness that for an indefinite period of time seized both the intersection of Kiliński and Podwale Streets and the survivors, separated two contrasting realities that were so contradictory that they both seemed unlikely – the reality before the explosion and the reality after it.

The former was joyful, filled with celebratory excitement. The insurgents had seized a German tank and were now leading it through the narrow streets around the Old Town market square. The thrilling news had spread through basements, cantonments and barricades, with civilians and

soldiers rushing from everywhere. Everyone wanted to see it with their own eyes, to touch it, to know for sure that a tank, albeit small and unarmed, but still a symbol of the mighty and so-far invincible German army, had fallen into Polish hands. Seeing it was like a drug; it made it possible to forget the haunting uncertainty and to believe in victory. Euphoria ensued, with the circumstances encouraging people to celebrate the success. Although the district's days were numbered, a powerful enemy strike on its northern part

(3) *Robert Bielecki, Gustaw – Harnaś. Dwa powstańcze bataliony (P.I.W. 1989), 227.*

(4) *Bielecki, 232.*

having just begun, on that warm Sunday the southern part of the Old Town was enjoying its final moments of peace. Before 6 p.m., the presentation of the seized tank had already become a triumphant, joyous procession. Now and then the tank would stop at barricades built across the streets, with people dismantling them to let it through. Each such operation took more than 10 minutes and the surrounding crowd grew thicker and thicker. At the barricade near 1 Kiliński Street, there were over 300 people. A funeral procession was coming down Podwale Street, heading away from the Castle Square (5); when it met with the crowd, the joyful mood spread over some of the mourners. People gathered around the radio standing on the windowsill lost interest in the London broadcast. (6) Spectators looking through windows and standing on balconies clapped their hands; boy scouts standing on the tank cheered. Someone was waving a white-and-red flag, a war march was playing loudly on a gramophone in the window...

The other reality was that of darkness and silence, broken only by the crackling of fumes and human moans. There was no tank and no procession anymore, just the gruesome street filled with clouds of smoke, covered with rubble and brown slime – the remains of people, bloody, charred shreds, severed limbs and heads, disfigured, limbless bodies, sundered organs. The walls of tenement houses were smeared with blood, with pieces of bodies

(5) *Robert Bielecki, Długa 7 w Powstaniu Warszawskim (Vizja Press&IT 2010), 37.*

(6) *Bielecki, 37.*

hanging from the remains of street lamps and balconies, pressed into crevices in gates and windows. Something was moving in the dark, silhouettes wandered here and there without purpose. The wounded – shocked, naked, white from the dust, red from the blood and black from the soot – looked around with unseeing eyes, searching for neighbours who had been standing next to them just moments before, trying to understand where they were and what exactly had happened. Many of those getting up on their feet had suffered fatal injuries, their reaction being an instinctive, adrenaline-fueled attempt to move as far away as possible from the danger zone. After making a few shaky steps, they weakened and slumped to the ground, dead. Those who

had not suffered even the slightest injury ran out of their safe spots to help the others, but were stunned by the sight. Unable to stand the macabre view and horrifying stench, some vomited, while others, confronted with a reality no normal person could grasp, turned into automatons and began lifting from the ground the severed palms, feet and heads and piled them in a heap by the wall. A few minutes passed before the smoke cleared and the dust settled, before the survivors shook off the shock.

Only then did the rescue operation begin, when stretchers turned out to be just as useful as coal shovels grabbed from guardrooms.(7)

(7) *Bielecki, 41.*

3.

Since the early days of World War II, Warsaw had experienced a number of apocalyptic catastrophes, most of them many times greater than the explosion on Kiliński Street, both in terms of numbers of casualties and the destroyed area. In the summer of 1942, a walled railway siding located in the centre of the city was practically an extension of an extermination camp, the threshold of a gas chamber that in less than two months was crossed by several hundred thousand Varsovians. A year later, tens of thousands of people were killed during and after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, with a large part of the city razed to the ground. In the first days of the Warsaw Uprising, this fate was shared by the inhabitants of another district of the city. On 31 August, two weeks after the massacre on Kiliński Street, the dome of St. Kazimierz Church on the New Town market square came crumbling down after being bombed by a *Stuka*, with the church's floors consequently caving in and burying alive nearly a thousand people hiding in the catacombs below. Perhaps that last tragedy most resembles the 13 August explosion; despite having resulted in a higher number of casualties, it remains almost entirely forgotten. The symbolic impact of the explosion on Kiliński Street and its crucial role in the postwar historical narrative of the Uprising stem from the dramatic contradiction that ensued in that one-hundred-thousandth of a second when reality was divided in two, and from the shock caused by this contradiction.

These tragedies, although different in terms of their duration and dynamics, shared a plot that Varsovians had been familiar with since the first month of the war. It is enough to mention the first catastrophic day of wartime Warsaw, the infamous **Easter Monday** of 25 September 1939, when thousands of the city's inhabitants (8) were killed or injured in an all-day bombing by the Luftwaffe. Tensions rose as the Polish Radio announcer, his voice unnaturally pitched, delivered a coded message about the looming air raid. The sound of alarm sirens followed shortly and when it was joined by the growing hum of aircraft engines, the tension gave way to fear. Hiding in bomb shelters and basements, still hoping for salvation, the city's inhabitants prepared for the worse, praying and not moving a muscle. The sound of the

air raid grew from *piano* to *fortissimo*, the whizz of a dropping bomb could be heard, followed by the boom of the explosion; the earth trembled, the lights went off. The terrified people heard one floor after another crumble over their heads every few seconds. “*Is this it already? Already?*” (9) they kept saying, pressing themselves against the wall.

This description concerns a bombing, but a similar dynamic and sense of inescapability, coupled with an exponentially mounting feeling of terror, were experienced by witnesses of all the other aforementioned tragedies. Instead of the wail of a siren attached to the belly of a *Stuka*, the menace may (8)

(8) *Historians speak of ten thousand casualties, but this figure seems inflated given the number of aircraft used in the air raid, the total weight of bombs dropped and the number of casualties of other air raids, such as the bombing of Hamburg*
(9) *Miron Białoszewski, A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* (Ardis 1977), 105.

have been heralded by the sound of the hobnailed shoes of the Jewish Ghetto Police or hoarse shouts from Dirlewanger’s hoodlums, but the end was always the same.

The awareness of impending death that the inhabitants of Warsaw had to face is one of the most traumatic experiences known to man. That said, the time during which this experience unfolded, be it a just few or more than ten minutes, as in the case of an air raid, allowed for defence mechanisms to be activated, enabling people to overcome their crippling fear. In the 1970s, American anthropologist Ernest Becker formulated his ‘Terror Management Theory’. Although this theory focuses mainly on methods for overcoming the fear of death, which is typical for human beings and results from the awareness of one’s mortality, it provides an explanation for how the *activation of anxiety buffer* (10) functions in the face of sudden and potentially terminal danger. In order to get used to the unbearable reality, people create an alternative version of it, filled with ideas and interpretations that make it meaningful. In their own eyes, these people emphasize their own identity, which is legitimized by participating in a complex symbolic culture that involves elements such as religion, morality, patriotism and attachment to a primary group. In other words, in an attempt to somehow ease their own suffering, the fear-stricken Varsovians who were huddled in bomb shelters or

(10) *Marzena Rusaczyk, “Teoria opanowywania trwogi: wprowadzenie do elementów aktualnego dyskursu i prezentowanych tekstów”, Teoria opanowywania trwogi. Dyskurs w literaturze amerykańskiej, ed. Marzena Rusaczyk (Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar 2008), 9.*

rushed into railway carriages for the last time emphasized and bid farewell to their cultural self – the cultivated vision of themselves, their closest ones and their surrounding. They felt as if they were part of a national or religious community, a feeling that was coupled with that of moral superiority over

their oppressors and the impression of experiencing something inconceivable and noble at the same time. The death they anticipated could also be incorporated into this logic; it thus accrued meaning and became a sacrifice made in the name of professed ideological structures. It provided hope of both reward for those who died and punishment for the oppressors. The voice of the dead is much weaker than that of the living, however. When it turned out that a basement ceiling had resisted the impact of the crumbling upper floors, when a functionary or a police officer who knew you saved you from the transport, or when the raging hoodlums were brought to heel by a passing officer, the defence mechanisms were no longer necessary; the sheer fact of salvation, of keeping the life that had seemed lost, became the essence of the whole event. Later, when coping with feelings such as missing lost relatives, resentment, the need for justice or the urge to bear witness, the conviction that the experienced ordeal was meaningful made it possible to draw formative conclusions and properly work through the trauma, which in turn led to development of an identity.

4.

The survivors of the explosion on Kiliński Street did not have such an opportunity. Having lived for many years in a world full of danger and anticipation of death, they must have developed the appropriate defence mechanisms, but the scenario that unfolded on that particular day caught them completely off guard. The initial, apparent success negated the laboriously developed terror management method – the individual vision of reality that most of them, especially the civilians, had probably accepted, the vision in which they got to play the role of victims, fugitives, people stubbornly protecting their lives rather than fighting for it, passively reacting to reality instead of trying to confront it. The capture of the tank – a sudden, euphoric experience witnessed in a constantly growing group of people – changed this mindset. Suddenly, a weapon fell into their hands; they regained hope, subjectivity, license to take initiative, the right to attack and win. Even more than that, during the several hours of the triumphal procession they felt as if they had already won. The vehicle was no longer a garden-variety product of the German military industry; it was now a meaningful symbol, a springboard for creating a new anxiety-management tool. The fact that it was a better, more effective tool than those previously available resulted in a general euphoria.

All of this only made the subsequent events all the more horrifying and unfathomable. The survivors had to deal with the catastrophe completely exposed; due to the preceding events, they cast aside their basic, proven defence mechanism, only to see the second mechanism blasted to bits in a fraction of a second. The crippling feeling of horror was accompanied by an equally deep, painful feeling of disappointment – after all, it would have been better to live in ignorance than in the awareness of having lost something

special. Returning to the state that existed prior to the capture of the tank was no longer possible; and the state they were now in was incomparably worse. First of all, the omnipresent gruesomeness was unbearable. In terms of scale, the extermination of the Ghetto and the Wola massacre were both incomparably greater tragedies than the trap tank explosion, but they took place in a clearly defined, closed space, a sort of 'death zone'. A great many people were killed in them, but only a small number of survivors could bear witness to their martyrdom; and in some situations, like in the case of gas chambers, there were no survivors at all. With some exceptions, the living did not get to see the evidence of the crime – the ashes of the several hundred thousand Jews and Poles who were burned alive and are buried in an area of two rather small glades; while the only things left of those killed and buried alive in air raids were memories and inscriptions on walls. On Kiliński Street, the worlds of the living and the dead converged, much to the horror of the former. Instead of resting in the ground, deformed, mutilated corpses literally fell from the skies, with pieces of bodies discovered on roofs and balconies within a radius of several hundred metres from the epicentre of the explosion.

One does not have to be a psychologist to imagine the effect the sight of the remains of hundreds of other humans annihilated in an extremely brutal way can have on a person. No one can ever be ready for such a sight nor the accompanying smell, which the witnesses tend to mention less often,. It is smell, not sight or hearing, that is the most primal, the most carnal and suggestive of all senses. Apart from this macabre perspective, the senses of survivors and rescuers were attacked by the stench of afterdamp mixed with stench of burned hair and tissue, causing them to experience what TMT experts would call 'mortality salience'.⁽¹¹⁾ Exposure to such an experience makes people realize all the more their own inevitable mortality, *forcing them to activate their anxiety buffer and restore the frayed sense of safety.*⁽¹²⁾ Unfortunately, this anxiety-buffering method, which needs to be based on community and culture, works only when those using it are deeply convinced that they fulfil all the underlying rules and can meet the existing standards. Thanks to this, in a time of trial the community they are part of can serve as a support and be perceived as reliable and dependable. The system stops working when cracks appear, when those using it feel that they have made a mistake, breached the rules. And it was certainly a mistake ⁽¹³⁾ to start

¹¹ Rusaczyk, 13.

¹² Rusaczyk, 13.

¹³ Rusaczyk, 12.

the damaged vehicle, dismantle the barricades and move the deadly load into the very heart of the neighborhood. The insurgents were led astray by their own enthusiasm, self-confidence and insubordination. Death did not fall from the skies, it was not inflicted by the enemy. It was brought upon the

victims by their brothers, compatriots. The people directly responsible for this died, but even if there is no evidence to back this claim, other witnesses may have felt partially responsible for the tragedy. Together with the devastating experience of the first few minutes and hours following the explosion, the feeling of guilt put them in a state they could not bear. Meanwhile, in the surrounding wartime reality there was no time to laboriously work through the experienced trauma. The survivors were perfectly aware that the coming days would bring more tragic events, perhaps even more so than the explosion. Deeper than the TMT method developed with regard to social evolution, their self-preservation instinct demanded something that could instantly alleviate their pain and fear, bringing them peace and thus increasing their chances of survival. The result was an escape into confabulation.

5.

“Don’t bring me any corpses!” yells a doctor without turning around; he is busy clasping wounds. “They left a time bomb in the tank, didn’t they?” a paramedic asks him. “The Krauts tricked us like suckers. They must have stuffed it with plastic... Hold this guy, goddamnit!” (14) Unsurprisingly, it remains unknown who was the first person to suggest that the explosion had not been a tragic accident, but a German ruse. Consequently, in order to imagine the moment when this happened one should seek support in literary vision and scientific theory. The above conversation takes place between two paramedics participating in the rescue operation just minutes after the catastrophe. Although they were both old hands, in order to better cope with the horror around them they resorted to boyish vulgarities and sarcasm. This approach, together with the possibility to focus on the task they had been given, let them in a way separate themselves from the horror, while also making them look more authoritative to the stupefied victims, including both the wounded and the witnesses. Bratny’s intuition did not fail him when he decided to make paramedics the inventors of the conspiracy theory; after all, those who were saving bodies might also have tried to save souls. By combining simple facts, the unbearable and incomprehensible was made reasonable and acceptable. It took just a few words to rebuild the feeling of community. The fear and sorrow that had existed within the community moment earlier, considerably hindering its ability to overcome the terror, were shifted elsewhere, to a place that seemed the most obvious choice of all, with Germans once again confirmed as the *social personification of evil*. (15) However, the paramedic’s instinctive reaction was

14 Roman Bratny, Kolumbowie. Rocznik 20 (P.I.W. 1977), 299.

15 Rusaczyk, 15.

only apparently an anxiety-buffering technique. In reality, it was a poor substitute, a placebo. The foundation of this set of values based on unconfirmed rules was extremely fragile. Initially, it may have brought relief,

but in the long term it had to fall apart due to the emerging doubts, which was not the worst of available solutions. A need to recreate the defence mechanism appeared, which in turn would enable working through the trauma properly. However, it was also possible to remain in this uncertain yet complacent reality. To continue to exist, this reality needed to be fueled by notions that were not just unconfirmed, but false. It could then separate itself completely from the founding event and become a myth. This is what happened with regard to the explosion on Kiliński Street.

(Eng.) Explosion – summarized by WJW

Explosive carrier - **Schwerer Ladungstraeger Sonder Kraftfahrzeug 301 Borgwart IV.**
Explosive load – 500 kg of TNT

Explosion – ball of fire in epicenter, after 1/10 000 sec. → temp. 3 000 ° C. → zone of extr. high pressure (several 1 000's times that of atmospheric); → shock wave (gases, fire), propagation velocity > 20 Mach/25 000 km/hr. Far behind – acoustic effect (deafening thunder).

Injuries - < 5 m from epicenter – disappeared, shredded, standing > 10 m – severed limbs, shrapnel-type injuries, 10-20 m – severe burns, shrapnel wounds. All in the 200 m radius were affected. Secondary return (concentric) shock wave sucked out people from buildings and balconies. All this lasted < 1 sec.

Location of the explosion site on the map fragment of the Old Town in Warsaw - from a book "BYL DOM" (pol.) by Anna Szatkowska, p. 193,

