

## Tracking Urban Legends: A Conversation between Dionizjusz Czubala and Piotr Grochowski

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**Dionizjusz Czubala** is one of the most important contemporary Polish folklorists; his research pertains to the occupational folklore of potters and various forms of oral narratives. Among his works of particular value are his field studies concerning urban legends conducted in Poland, Russia, Ukraine and Mongolia, reports from which were published in the “FOAFtale News” bulletin, and research on memoirs connected with the Holocaust, published in the book *O tym nie wolno mówić... Zagłada Żydów w opowieściach wspomnieniowych ze zbiorów Dionizjusza Czubali*, 2019 (*We Are Not Allowed to Speak about It... The Extermination of the Jews in Memoirs from the Collection of Dionizjusz Czubala*). He is the author of numerous monographs and collections of folklorist texts, including: *Folklor garn-carzy polskich*, 1978 (*The Folklore of Polish Potters*); *Podania i opowieści z Zagłębia Dąbrowskiego. Sto lat temu i dzisiaj*, 1984 (*Legends and Stories from the Dąbrowa Basin. A Hundred Years Ago and Today*); *Opowieści z życia. Z badań nad folklorem współczesnym*, 1985 (*Stories from Life. From Research on Contemporary Folklore*); *Nasze mity współczesne*, 1996 (*Our Contemporary Myths*); *Polskie legendy miejskie. Studium i materiały*, 2014 (*Polish Urban Legends. Study and Materials*).

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p. g. How did your adventure in researching urban legends begin?

d. c. In the 1980s, I was collecting war memoirs, and in the course of this collection, there happened to be texts that did not fit the model of the classic memoir story. I noticed that these were texts that appeared, lived for a short time and had the ability to spread quickly. At the time, I didn't know what to call them and, writing the book, I described them as sensations.<sup>1</sup> At that time, Jan Harold Brunvand's *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*<sup>2</sup> was also published. When I read it, I suddenly realized that Brunvand was writing about these sensations of mine, only he was calling them urban legends. I wrote him a note saying that I was also dealing with this and that I would like to publish an article about it. And Brunvand sent this private letter of mine to Bill Ellis, editor of FOAFtale News, a newsletter dedicated to urban legends. Ellis published my letter in full and also added that a Polish researcher was looking for contacts. Suddenly, I started receiving various inquiries about urban legends from all over the world, I started looking for them, and that's how collecting took off. And it was the 1980s, a time of particular political and economic crisis in Poland, so it

<sup>1</sup> This refers to the publication: Czubala, D. (1985). *Opowieści z życia. Z badań nad folklorem współczesnym*. Uniwersytet Śląski [Tales from life. From research on contemporary folklore.]

<sup>2</sup> Brunvand, J. H. (1981). *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings*. Norton.

was the perfect moment, because crises always favor the birth of everyday legends. And the number of these texts began to increase rapidly.

By then I knew very well what I was collecting, and I realized that this was a new phenomenon that Janina Hajduk-Nijakowska and Dorota Simonides had also noticed. They also published an article at that time in which they called these texts, like me, sensational stories.<sup>3</sup> I quickly began sending Bill Ellis reports on my fieldwork, and not only from Poland, as I also began receiving reports from the East - from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. At that time, our contacts were easier, because Polish universities had agreements with Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian universities, and I went there, and quite soon I started to include East Slavic materials in my collection. This was of great interest to Ellis and Western researchers, because it was an unknown area to them and they even wondered if urban legends existed there at all. So my penetrations answered their questions. And all these reports of mine, and there were probably seven of them, were published in print in the FOAFtale News<sup>4</sup>, so that various researchers reached out to them. Hence, I had many requests to make available the legends that these scholars needed. They in turn began to send me their own texts. That's why, at that time, I was probably the only researcher in Poland who had such a broad overview of what was being written on this subject around the world. In turn, Brunvand, in his *Encyclopaedia of Urban Legends*, described the Polish output based on my texts.<sup>5</sup>

p. g. What methods did you use when collecting urban legends?

d. c. Quite quickly I began to organize my materials, dividing them into thematic strands and arranging them in folders described with such headings as: "doctors and miracle cures", "erotic and sexual", "market", "related to religion", etc. I composed the questionnaire on this basis. At the beginning it had about 30 questions, but after reading Brunvand's book and the first Polish inquiries there were already 250. Rarely would anyone submit to such an interview.

How did I collect? One method was to try to find someone who would sit down with you and allow themselves to be entrapped. Then I started this normal interview by questionnaire. This is very effective, but only with those interviewees who are able to work with you. People get bored with it quickly, but urban legends have such

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<sup>3</sup> Hajduk-Nijakowska, J., Simonides, D. (1989). *Opowiadania ludowe* [Folk tales]. In: D. Simonides (ed.), *Folklor Górnośląska*. Wydawnictwo Śląsk. [Folklore of Upper Silesia. Silesian Publishing House].

<sup>4</sup> These texts are as follows: Earliest Accounts of Contemporary Legends in Russia. FOAFtale News, 18 (June 1990), 6-7; The 'Black Volga': Child Abduction Urban Legends in Poland and Russia. FOAFtale News, 21 (March 1991), 1-3; AIDS and Aggression: Polish Legends about HIV-infected People. FOAFtale News, 23 (September 1991), 1-5; The Death Car: Polish and Russian Examples. FOAFtale News, 25 (March 1992), 2-4; Mongolian Contemporary Legends [3 parts]. FOAFtale News, 28 (December 1992), 1-5; 29 (March 1993), 1-7; 31 (November 1993), 1-4. The journal is available on FOAFtale NEWS On-Line: <https://www.folklore.ee/FOAFtale/>.

<sup>5</sup> Brunvand, J. H. (2012). *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends: Updated and Expanded Edition*. ABC-CLIO. Dionizjusz Czubala's materials formed the basis for the entries: Poland, Russia, and Mongolia, but were also referred to in a number of other entries concerning particular themes of urban legends.

a power to activate emotions that, if they are current, people easily dig them out of their memory because they have somehow lived through them, thought about them and remember them. This produced results. And the second method was to collect what you happened to hear from people. And it happened to me very often when I talked about legends with the passion of an explorer in my lectures. This would catch on and the students would immediately tell me their variants, and I would carry a tape recorder with me and record. Urban legends are good to record, but I also did a lot of handwriting, because these are short texts and I often didn't have time to turn on the tape recorder.

So these two methods worked well for me. But working with students was ideal. When did I work particularly well with them? At exams. You are conducting an exam and the student answers well or very well. He gets a good grade and you can see that he is happy. And if you ask such a cheerful person a question, he doesn't leave you and you can 'exploit' him research-wise. So this method was very good and I collected two kinds of texts with it. When someone passed poorly, I would then ask what magical procedures they had done to make the exam a success. And the students answered very honestly; they usually used one or two of these tricks, and that was the first type of text. And the second was just urban legends, which the students were very keen to tell me.

p. g. But the students were not only your "informants". They often participated in your research, helping you to collect materials. How did they cope in the field?

d. c. I was the supervisor of the Folklore Studies Research Group at the University of Silesia and when I announced that we had money for a two-week research camp in an area, I usually had 20-30 people contact me. Most often we collected materials in the Dąbrowa Basin. The students were well prepared, they knew what to collect, they had tape recorders and questionnaires. We arrive at the camp, set off in the field and after the first expeditions people come back with nothing. What happened? It is too difficult for them to overcome this first stage of overcoming strangeness, overcoming the distrust of interlocutors who welcome them, listen to them, but have nothing to say or dismiss them with nothing at all. Students often joined together in larger groups out of fear, which made it even more difficult for them to hold conversations. And there were maybe two out of 20 people who did very well and brought in tapes of recordings day after day.

But there were also complications that resulted from my mistakes. For example, one time we were in Ukraine and I completely gave the students the initiative in conducting interviews. They came up with the idea of doing a group interview with Ukrainian students. They invited them. Such pretty boys came, they brought vodka. Our girls were also very beautiful. And I'm sitting on the side, I don't want to interfere, I want the youngsters to prove themselves. The students' leader is to conduct the interview. She has a questionnaire. And what does she choose from this questionnaire? She chooses a question about sexual themes. When she asks the first

question, then the boys start laughing, they fall off their chairs and it couldn't be stopped at all. They found every subsequent question equally funny. Eventually the girls started laughing too and so did I and no thread could be saved. And then, you know, the boys took out the vodka, there was fun, singing...

p. g. How is it that urban legends sometimes provoke laughter and sometimes are taken extremely seriously and sometimes even cause panic?

d. c. In 1989 there was an AIDS panic in our country and every day there were stories about it. It was not only ordinary people who succumbed to such panic, but also journalists. For example, stories were popular that well-known hotel prostitutes who receive sophisticated foreign guests are AIDS carriers. And I found an article in one of the newspapers in which the journalist confidently calculated how many clients such a prostitute received per day and how many people she could infect through this, and these were astronomical numbers. So you can see that this journalist was a classic victim of an urban legend. After a year, this AIDS panic died down. There is always an identical mechanism in urban legends. At the moment of birth we have a dramatic and emotional news story, which causes the legend to spread rapidly, then it reaches such a critical point, a peak, and then suddenly its credibility collapses. The reason for this is that when the same story is told differently for the tenth time, the audience reflects critically and then very often the story turns into a comic story, into a joke, a process which I have also documented many times. This was the case, for example, with the well-known "Black Volga" story line.<sup>6</sup> When this legend was active, there were various denials from the police, journalists, officials who said that no such case had been reported anywhere, that it was an absolute invention and no child had been kidnapped in this way. None of this helped, as the panic extended to the children who were afraid of the Black Volga, as well as to the parents and teachers who contributed most to spreading the legend. So initially it had incredible credibility and when I asked the students about the Black Volga, in that first period their stories were so dramatic that it made your hair stand on end. And then, a year or so later, when I asked about the Black Volga the whole room of students burst out laughing, because the thread had already been degraded. Later it might be revived in a new form, with different characters or details of events. I have repeatedly written down, for example, the plot of the Black Volga who kidnaps people to cut out their kidney, and there was a variation in Russia that talked about cutting out eyes for a prominent Russian ophthalmologist.

p. g. Were you, as an expert in this field, asked to consult and deny such suspicious sensations?

d. c. No, but I have given many interviews and the journalists were usually surprised that a scientist deals with something like this, which for them is their daily bread, because urban legend is fodder for the so-called tabloid press and other mass

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<sup>6</sup> Volga was a brand of Russian executive cars, produced from 1956 to 2010, commonly used by authorities in communist countries; see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GAZ\\_Volga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GAZ_Volga)

media. Most often, they asked me what I was collecting and how I was collecting it, and of course the interview usually ended with a citation of a few recent examples. I always had the most recent stories at my fingertips and the journalists were more than happy to publish them. On the other hand, they seem to have avoided investigating whether they themselves were often the victims of urban legends. And from my observations, this was often the case. For example, there was a thread about mafias or religious sects running special farms or orphanages where children were bred or gathered to provide organs for the treatment of rich people in the United States. This has been an extremely popular theme in South America, but in Poland, I have encountered many times on television, on the radio and in the press, statements in which journalists claimed with complete faith that such places existed in the world, and did not even mention that they might be rumors or hearsay, so they were classic victims of an urban legend.

p. g. I would like to talk a little more about your travels to the East, i.e. the East Slavic countries and Mongolia. Unlike in the West, urban legends are probably not the subject of intensive scientific research there?

d. c. I have been to Mongolia three times, each time for almost the entire summer holidays; that was 1991, then 1999 and 2000. But I started my research as early as 1990. At the time, I befriended a Mongolian man whose name was Moncho. He came to us at the University of Silesia for a research internship. He was a keen hunter and I used to take him hunting. He lived in a dormitory for assistants, he had two rooms, and so he could take in other Mongols and I would go to him throughout the year, and I would ask his wife, his brothers and everyone who came to see him about urban legends. In short, I was actually terrorizing them all a bit, because they couldn't get away with it, and it gave me a lot of material. But in Mongolia the situation turned out to be completely different to what I had imagined. I went there mainly to collect stories about the yeti, because that fascinated me at the time (they have their own name for this animal there – *almas*). Moncho was my translator and guide. He knew what I was collecting, what I had come for, and provided me with contacts, which was not easy to make, especially as I was doing the interviews in Russian and had to look for people who spoke that language. But my first experiences were downright shocking. In Western countries, people are used to the fact that if you ask a question, you get an answer - any answer, it can be negative, there can be a nod, a gesture - but there is some kind of contact. In Mongolia, on the other hand, I encountered situations like this one. One day my friend's father-in-law came to see 'this European' because he was curious. He was an educated man, curious about the world. I was convinced that we would make contact in no time and the conversation would be successful. Moncho sat us down at a table, made some tea or coffee and got on with something. And I'm talking to this father-in-law of his. The father-in-law asks: "You came for research, what are you interested in?" I think to myself: "You have to explain to him exactly what my research is about." So I say that I'm interested in such contemporary legendry, such special cases, often dramatic, and

I give Polish examples. And I think he understood what I was saying. In a moment his daughter, that is Moncho's wife, and another person sit down at this table, and I am already convinced that in a moment we will be collecting legends. So I ask him the first question - the easiest one, to which every interlocutor in the world today has an answer, which is to ask about UFOs. But he doesn't answer anything. I think to myself: 'Maybe this question is some kind of sensitive one and for some reason he doesn't answer it'. Well, I'm looking for another thread. The other one, which I think will allow the narrator to 'talk up', is the *almas*, that is yeti. So I ask him a question about yeti, but he doesn't respond in general, as if the question bounced off him, he just addresses his daughter in Mongolian. And such situations have happened to me a few more times. It also happened that Moncho specially invited his friend to meet me. I spent the whole evening explaining to him what I was interested in, he listened, but he didn't answer any question for me. And I thought it would end up like it did with this father-in-law, and he comes the next day and tells me a lot of his story lines.

In Mongolia, the difficulty with doing such research is also that the line between urban legends and traditional plots is often blurred here. I was told a lot of such stories here that I wasn't sure were urban legends. For example, in one town there was a child who could not be helped by any doctor. So the parents went with this child to a lama and tell him how the child was ill. And he says this: "You have a red object brought from outside the house. You need to return this object." They go back and search. They have searched the whole house, there is no other person's red object anywhere. And finally, there is a red pencil or pen in this child's pencil case; the child has brought the wrong object from school. The family got rid of the object and the child recovered. Is this an urban legend? The incident is contemporary, but the very pattern and meaning of the behavior depicted is very traditional.

p. g. From your research in the East, do you remember any dangerous situations where people reacted aggressively or you felt threatened?

d. c. I have not had any such situations. The Russians are very welcoming. I most often interviewed them when I was traveling by train through Siberia for many days. You sit in these compartments, you get bored and if you find an interesting interlocutor, people open up very quickly. Anyway, I made friends in such a way that at those big Siberian stations, when I had to go to a stall to get bread, they would make sure that I didn't stay at the station, that someone didn't steal something from me. So when it came to the Russians, I experienced a great deal of cordiality, and also forbearance even with regard to the really stupid questions in my questionnaire, but I did not encounter aggression. The fact that lots of people didn't answer is normal. There is an art to finding an interviewee.

p. g. And do you remember your best interviewees?

d. c. Yes. Such people stay in your memory for life, because it is a great joy, so much satisfaction and emotional experience. My life interview took place in Lviv. I

went there with students as part of an exchange between the University of Lviv and the University of Silesia. We were accommodated in a dormitory and I noticed that there was a lovely, smiling grandmother at the janitor's lodge who spoke Polish. And I started to talk to her, but she was so busy with this issuing of keys and checking whether a stranger was coming in that she didn't have time. So I agreed with her that I would come at ten o'clock, when she was closing the lodge. And that was my interview of a lifetime. I slept in that dormitory for three nights, and two nights we recorded the interview. I recorded several tapes. The joy of the collector is that you have a questionnaire, you ask questions, and the interviewee immediately, like a volcano, answers each one. And she wasn't tired of it at all. I was already falling on my face and she kept on talking. I then had some kind of camera and took a picture of her, which was incredibly successful. I decided to repay her at least with this photo, because it came out perfectly. But I didn't go to Lviv for a long time and it wasn't until my friend was going there on a trip that I said: "Take this photo. There's a grandmother there, she has that name, give it to her." After his return, my friend says: "Listen, I've never experienced anything like this. When I said that there was a Pole here, he was talking to you and he sends this photo, she started crying and she hugged me and she was crying so much over this photo that I was shocked." In this way I made this grandmother happy and somehow I reciprocated for this wonderful interview.

And the second interview of my life was in a completely different situation. I traveled to Mongolia for the first time in 1991, and in Siberia, already in Omsk, three students who were going to Lake Baikal for a holiday in some resort got into the next compartment. So we had a two or three day journey to that Baikal, because they were getting off in Irkutsk. Then, for the first time, my students who were traveling with me helped me, because they made contact with these Russian students very quickly. They came to me and said: "Professor, these girls know urban legends." I immediately took a tape recorder and went. And it was Nastia, Natasha and Irina. I remember exactly - lovely girls. Something like that never happened to me again later, that in a group interview there were three answers to every question. The first story is told by Nastia, then Natasha, and then Irena. Three variants on one question. And when I ask the question, each of them tells a story. In Poland, I did group interviews with students, but even if they knew other variants of a given legend, they only added the differences and then there were not three different plots, but one plot with additions. Here, on the other hand, I had three independent stories. Well, it was an interview! I recorded several tapes of an hour and a half each. Of course, I was interrupting, we were treating ourselves, because in those Russian trains, when you take out something to eat, the Russians treat you straight away. So we also offered these girls something. Such a friendship developed that one of them later wrote to me and sent me several pages of material related to the legend of Tsar Alexander I. This is a popular story in Russia, which says that Tsar Alexander I did not die a natural death, but got into a boat in Taganrog and disappeared. And then he

appeared in Siberia as a holy sage and died there surrounded by great respect. Throughout the 19th century there were excursions to the grave of this old man, who was treated as Tsar Alexander.

p. g. Are there different stories told in Eastern Europe and Asia that have their own peculiarities, or do you encounter the same themes as in the West?

d. c. When it comes to urban legends, we now have large collections of American, English, German, Belgian, Italian, Polish, Czech, and we don't have large collections from Eastern Slavic countries or Far Eastern countries, so it's not easy to say what percentage of them are international plots. As I look at my collections of eastern repertoire, it seems to me that western themes are present in them, but they often have a peculiar local face. Mongolia is a good example. There I was able to record global themes that had strong accents of their own. Mongolia is a small country - about three million inhabitants - which is constantly threatened by that one billion Chinese, and every Mongolian is afraid that sooner or later they might lose their freedom. Hence China and the Chinese are portrayed as a great danger also in urban legends. And this is probably such a universal process or pattern. Julian Krzyżanowski once tried to describe it, stating that typical existential situations - e.g. certain dangers - influence similar stories to arise independently of each other in different places.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the similarity of urban legends around the world can also be explained by these classic existential situations, whether they occur in Mongolia, Russia, Poland or other countries.

p. g. And what is the Mongolian specificity of international urban legends themes?

d. c. Let me give you such an example. In America and Europe, one of the most famous urban legends is "The Vanishing Hitchhiker". It tells of a driver driving down the road and being stopped by someone very characteristically dressed. It could be a grandfather, a woman in black, a girl. He stops, asks for a lift and gives an address. The driver knows the address, knows where to go. During the drive, the passenger doesn't talk at all, remains silent, sitting in the back seat. When the driver pulls up to the address, the person is no longer in the car, but he has not stopped anywhere. He does not understand the situation, goes to the house and tells her what happened. Then the woman who opened the door for him says: "That was my daughter; she died one year ago." And she shows him the picture, and he sees that he has indeed driven the person who is in the picture.

"The Vanishing Hitchhiker" also occurs in Mongolia, but there are different local variations of this theme. It must be remembered that there are basically no tarmac roads in Mongolia. Apart from Ulaan Bator, of course, because that city - like all other cities in the world - has asphalted roads, but these roads end in each direction

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<sup>7</sup> Krzyżanowski, J. (1977). Typowe sytuacje życiowe w literaturze i folklorze. [Typical life situations in literature and folklore]. In J. Krzyżanowski, Paralele. Studia porównawcze z pogranicza literatury i folkloru. [Paralele. Comparative studies from the borderland of literature and folklore]. PW



after a few kilometers and a tract on the steppe begins. These tracts, however, are used by truck drivers who drive all over Mongolia and bring in rams, kumis, cheeses to feed this big city. And this is the specific setting in which these local variations of "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" are set. One is the so-called 'speed runner': the driver of a Mongolian truck notices that a figure is speeding past his vehicle, as fast as the car. The second variation: out of nowhere, a girl appears in the window outside the moving truck, holding on to some kind of handle and looking at the driver. He is so frightened by this occurrence that he pulls up to the nearest *hudon*, that is village, and starts dancing, meaning he has gone mad. In yet another variant, the Mongolian driver's car breaks down. Since it is difficult to find a car repair shop on the steppe, he starts to dismantle and repair his truck, and in the meantime a little boy comes up to him and asks for a lift. The driver says that when he finishes the repair he will give him a lift, but then the character disappears. This little boy is probably some transformation of the dwarf motif that appears in various earlier traditional Mongolian stories.

p. g. Is it possible to somehow summarize your research on urban legends in East Slavic countries and Mongolia? Do any general conclusions emerge from this research?

d. c. My research in the East has shown one interesting thing. Themes that appeared in the West moved to Poland in a few years and then further East. For example, the theme of poison or dangerous spiders in bananas. I first read about it in an article by a folklorist from Sweden with whom I had contact.<sup>8</sup> Later I started to come across variants of it in Poland. At that time I also traveled to Russia, but people there did not react at all to the phrase "poison in bananas". It wasn't until some time later that my wife brought me a story from Belarus: her sister told me that her brother-in-law had said that in Minsk, the banana ripening facility was located in the hospital, in a room right next to the mortuary, and from this mortuary, the deadly venom passes into these bananas, which must not be given to children because they will die. We have a similar situation with the AIDS stories mentioned earlier. The AIDS epidemic broke out in the United States much earlier than in Poland. In Mongolia, on the other hand, it appeared just when I arrived there, a few years later. At that time, everyone was saying how dangerous AIDS was and warning me not to go into the red-light district, because a few black men had come there and infected all the Mongolian prostitutes who had not previously been HIV positive.

Perhaps now that we have the internet, the situation has changed and threads are flashing from place to place. However, I researched oral transmissions in those years and found that, without a doubt, urban legends traveled through the world from West to East.

Interview transcription Mateusz Napiórkowski

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<sup>8</sup> Almost certainly Bengt af Klintberg; editorial comment.

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