
Foreword

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Polish Memory

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It was more or less a quarter century ago when the memory boom began (in the West a few years earlier, and in Poland a few years later), which is still going strong today, though there are some first signs of memory “fatigue” looming on the horizon. At the time, that is at the turn of the 1980s, many additional factors worked in its favor: the political transformation in the broader world and in Central-Eastern Europe in particular (accompanied in Poland by the abolition of censorship that restricted the knowledge about the past), the financial crisis (with the associated feelings of insecurity, which encourage searching for assurance in the past), the socio-civilizational changes (manifesting through, for example, the advent of the “risk society,” the crisis of utopian thinking or, otherwise, forethought as such – the rational planning for the future), and, finally, the consequences of self-critical work within the humanities, that led to, among others, the erosion of the moderns’ faith in objectivity, neutrality, and “finitude” of historical knowledge.

It cannot be ruled out that this change was also reinforced by certain traits of postmodern sensitivity or mentality, which (according to the notable diagnosis of Geoffrey Bennington from the 1970s) was based in “nostalgia for the future and waiting for the past” and, hence, in the overturning of basic human attitudes and strategies of action – acquiescing that the

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modern planning of the future based on rational criteria derived from the extrapolated properties of past experience is an inadvertently lost object of nothing more than sighs of nostalgia and opening to the returning wave of the past, the return of the suppressed, remission of repressed and unresolved collective and individual experience, as well as of rummaging, reordering, and arranging the heritage of the past in new patterns.

For the above reasons, as I see it, the three shifts or disengagements were so severe and radical: from the future to the past, from historical past to remembered past, from the conviction about the confinement and immutability of “past-in-itself” to the sense of past’s openness (its meaning, hierarchy of events, practical consequences) to interpretation and the needs and desires of the present. Today this constantly rising wave of memory is amplified as much by institutional structures and actions (of the state, museums, and commemorative initiatives), social fashions (staging and reenactment, combing through the digitized resources of the past’s heritage and recycling them in social media, certain kinds of board and video games, and the like), as by historical and memory politics that stir the collective emotions of smaller and larger groups, and – what is not completely without significance, as it has consequences in the abovementioned spheres – also by successive research tasks and intellectual challenges (whose number is continuously expanding) in the field of broadly defined humanities.

Among the already prolific library of studies devoted to Polish memory and research of Polish cultural memory (or Polish cultures of memory) there are nonetheless still very few works that aim to diagnose it in a synthesizing manner and attempt to define its specificity in the process.

This is exactly the kind of reflective thinking that was attempted by the team working on the project “W stronę nowej humanistyki: polska pamięć kulturowa” [Towards a new humanities: Polish cultural memory] in the course of five transdisciplinary summer schools for doctoral students (some three hundred PhD candidates participated in all editions) guided by a transdisciplinary and cross-generational faculty of some fifty Polish and foreign scholars working in the humanities. The outcomes of this multi-year project were summarized in five books published in the “Nowa Humanistyka” [New humanities] series, these were: *Literatura – teoria – życie* [Literature – theory – live] (2013), *Od pamięci biodziedzicznej do postpamięci* [From biomemory to postmemory] (2014), *Pamięć i afekty* [Memory and affects] (2015), *Historie afektywne, polityki pamięci* [Affective histories and politics of memory] (2016), and *Migracyjna pamięć, wspólnota, tożsamość* [Migrant memory, community, identity] (2016), as well as in several monographs and translations.

A particularly significant event, and a kind of summary of all the work conducted in the course of the project, was the conference titled “Polska pamięć. Ciągłość i przemiany; diagnoza i rokowania” [Polish memory. Continuity and change; diagnoses and prognoses], which was held at the turn of September and October 2016,

gathering instructors from previous years and experts invited for this very occasion. The conference papers were guided by a handful of preliminary research questions that could incite the creation of the aforementioned holistic diagnosis, a birds-eye view of the problem or a topography of standpoints, an attempt to pinpoint the specificity of the question at hand. These were questions such as: can Polish cultural memory be considered as a common habitus despite its broad diversity or rather as a gathering of disparate, oftentimes adversarial, Polish cultures of memory? Can classic anthropological categories of culture of shame, culture of pride, culture of guilt (and so forth) be useful in its descriptions, or should completely different analytical notions be sought to characterize it properly? Is their cultural memory mostly a burdensome heritage for the Poles, or is it fundamental to their agency? Does its key position among the factors determining individual and collective thinking, feeling, and acting lead to the sense of unsettledness in the present and anxiety about the future, or is this reasoning unsound? Is it just a "foreign country" for the contemporaries, or is it an inherent, emotionally and valuationally laden constituent of the here and now? Should Polish cultures of memory be considered in terms of contradictory traits (falling between, for example, the "sum of all wrongs," the traumatic memories and indecencies, and their treatment as a balance sheet of former triumphs and capital of values), or rather in terms of hybrid wholes? And, finally, what constitutes a threshold experience (and a continually relevant frame of reference) for contemporary figures of Polish cultural memory: the traditions of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Partitions of Poland, the Second World War and the Holocaust, the post-war years – all of these together or maybe something else entirely?

As is oftentimes the case when opening a democratic space of free debate, the questioner asks about what concerns him and the respondents answers as they see fit... These questions, though, I hope, neither banal nor irrelevant, were indisputably premature. The probes sent by writers into the space of Polish memory – important, revealing, and intellectually stimulating, in my opinion – revealed so many new deposits of problematic memory and of potentially incendiary matter, that any hopes of synthesis had to be laid to rest alongside the temptation to devise a formula of some absolute memory, which, as we know thanks to the Borgesian Funes, inadvertently threatens a complete epistemic and communicational catastrophe. One issue (the last one) can nonetheless be settled outright: the limits of collective experience forming collective memory are set for the contemporary by the events and experiences of the third generation (counting backwards, from the Second World War till today); forays into the interwar period or the times of the First World War were rather occasional and accompanied by explicit rationalizations. Answers to the remaining questions were also attempted, though they need to be pried from individual accounts of certain authors. Here I will forego summarizing or recapitulating them, and, instead, I only wish to point to certain specific traits of this

culture – culture of memory – that we happen to be living in, and to the methods employed in the service of understanding it.

“The past is a foreign country” – this metaphor appearing in the title of David Lowenthal’s 1985 book must seem, from the contemporary perspective, like the essence of the modernist stance towards the historical past (and even more so for the Polish reader, who hears the stanzas of Cyprian Kamil Norwid, one of the nation’s greatest poets, describing the countryside left behind the fleeting wheels of time). A foreign country is, indisputably, a reality that exists, in the wholeness of its “qualities,” independently from us; we can be granted access to it only through painstaking efforts of learning its language and laws, or through intermediaries such as tour or travel guides that point out the way to the tourist and explain the peculiarities encountered along the way. Meanwhile memory is more of a landscape than an independent territory, the effect of interaction of the subject with the environment in which she or he functions. In writing about the landscapes of memory I follow Sławomir Kaprański’s earlier studies, but I would like to emphasize certain features, inspired by research on cultural landscapes. Clearly, the most important aspect here is the abandonment of the point of view of an external, neutral observer and the adoption of (or, even more: inability to exclude) the stance of a participant, who actively shapes and forms the image of the environment, which, in turn, exerts its (“identity forming”) influence on him or her.

This is how these landscapes of memory are formed; they are activated through participation in the experiences (existential, emotional, axiological, political, social...), and also the needs, fears, or wants of individuals or communities. It is then easy to imagine that the same canon of historical events will be shaped into a different landscape of memory for a Polish Jew, a Polish peasant, a victim (Ukrainian, Lemko, or Boyko) of the Vistula Operation, proponents of upholding the traditions of the Second Polish Republic, supporters of the communist change, the memories of a child, a grown-up, or the representative of a sexual minority. These differences may not necessarily be associated with the falsity of a given person’s recollection and the truthfulness of another’s; they are the expression of a subjective point of view combining into a constellation of different perspectives, which we can switch off and on (or, otherwise, between which we can choose...) – though without the possibility of adopting some external, supreme, “spectatorial,” “objective” point of view. Whether we like it or not, we are always here “in our own company” (as Friedrich Nietzsche would have it), because we are a part of the system which we explore. And (remembered) reality does not become less real because of this, it simply requires proper methods of description.

This spatial dimension of cultures of memory should be confronted with the temporal one, which since (at least) the era of Thomas de Quincey was preferably expressed through the palimpsest metaphor. The deposits of memory, as is well known, do not constitute an inalterable substructure for the present, rather the

opposite – incessant tectonic shifts are taking place here; the work of memory and commemoration is at the same time the work of forgetting and not-remembering, excluding and repressing, but also of the returns of the repressed and the remission of memories of unwanted events and experiences. And just like from underneath the latter entries the earlier inscriptions begin to shine through, so from the latter “homogenized” (i.e., ideologically dominant or politically correct) version of events emerges a different point of view (that of the Other), demanding to be acknowledged, or at least heard. That is why the voice and fate of Polish Jews and the story of their relationship with Poles during the Holocaust and post-war years awaited its proper representation for a very long time (till the 1990s, to be exact). It was also not that long ago when the voices of Warmians and Masurians, Silesians and Kashubians began to be heard in the public sphere... We are also just now beginning to be aware that the fate of peasantry and their point of view is the matter of a still unwritten great novel of an entirely different Polish memory... Despite our tendencies to downplay and belittle, if not marginalize, the influence of the humanities on social and cultural life, it is hard not to notice that it is in the sphere of memory, where the influence of books by Jan Tomasz Gross, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, Jan Sowa, Grzegorz Niziołek, or Andrzej Leder (this is an incomplete list) deeply and significantly changed the mentality, sensitivity, as well as the attitudes and cultural habitus of Poles; changed it at least to such a degree that the return of previous convictions, responses, and behaviour does not seem (hopefully) possible anymore – as much on the individual as on the “statistical” level, what is more.

The palimpsest metaphor of earlier inscriptions shining through later writings points to still another, though no less important, problem (and source of impasse) in this aspect of cultural memory: the lack of space for everybody on the scene of collective memory. The Romani, as is well known, have for a long time voiced their uneasiness with the overshadowing of the Romani and Sinti genocide by the Shoah in the sphere of collective global awareness. For similar reasons, former Polish prisoners of Nazi concentration camps feel cast aside and unrepresented even in Polish memory and public sphere... It seems as if collective memory was constantly “exacting” hierarchization, selection, and structuring (and therefore also marginalization, exclusion, crushing into untellable pulp) of memory narratives, which – for this is what it comes down to – must conform to undefined, but closed and finite “spaces” of memory. Maybe, then, non-narrative modes of witnessing and representing is what should be sought? In the end, if an event has not been recounted it does not mean that it did not take place; after all, not everything is speakable or can be told.

The third meta-problem of Polish culture of memory that I would like to point to concerns its homogeneity (specificity, uniqueness) or heterogeneity (divergence, propensity for conflict). It is undeniable that reflection on Polish memory oftentimes

takes up traditions (though disavowing them at the same time) of deliberation on the Polish soul, national character, core, or essence. This is clearly supported by the direct association of the problem of collective memory with the question of national identity – though it does not explain it in its entirety, nor does it legitimize it. What is interesting, is that in practice this is closest to the psychoanalytic insights focused on identifying the trans-historical problem-behavior syndrome. We also encounter descriptions attempting to catalogue these diverse aspects of Polish memory without determining their interconnectedness. Still, it is plain for all to see that Polish memory has become a battlefield – to borrow Enzo Traverso's term – of competing, conflicted politics of memory (museums, monuments and counter-monuments, narratives, theatre productions, installations...).

Extrapolating what has been said above, it is easy to fall into a gloomy state bordering on horror: when we imagine a nation of tens of millions that stubbornly tries to move forwards going backwards, as it cannot unlock its gaze from the past, and which incessantly gets in its own way, and falls over its own feet... After all, it is enough to broaden the perspective somewhat – to a more comparative vantage point – to see that in this endless giant unruly plait there is nothing truly distinctive; similar traits are exhibited by other nations in this part of Europe, and most likely in the whole world. As Maciej Janowski recently pointed out, the history of Poland has never been, and therefore should not be, told as a history concerning solely Poles, because only then (when we give up this reductionist and isolationist perspective) can the sense of our own greatness, innocence, and especially uniqueness – stubbornly promoted by some – be worked through, and cut down to its proper (verifiable) size in confrontation with the actual state of facts. It is the same, in my opinion, with Polish memory – it also never was the memory of only (ethnic) Poles. It is therefore imperative, in short, to search for an effective way of permanently integrating the Other's way of looking (at us, and in us) into the core of Polish memory.

I would like to express, through a reference to Jean-Luc Nancy's inspiring concept of "inoperative community," that Polish memory – maybe similarly to all kinds of memory (cultural, collective, and probably also individual) – is a shared memory. And in both senses of the word: that is in what is shared through and within it (as in sharing someone's fate or their opinions), as well as in what makes it a split memory, one that is broken up into distinct parts. The specificity of this agonistic (as Chantal Mouffe characterized it) connection, that is rooted in feedback resulting from conflict, is captured by the third meta-memory metaphor: the metaphor of knots of memory. It has been recently used by the editors of the collected volume *Węzły pamięci niepodległej Polski* [Knots of independent Poland's memory] as an interesting and productive equivalent of Pierre Nora's "realms of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*). Here I would like to point to three consequences of this use. Firstly, in this case the effect of communal unity is not

based on harmonious complementarity, aligning of facts and beliefs, but on an unbreakable bond of contradictory, agonistic views and attitudes. Secondly, just as knots do not have a stable inside, so is also the core, specific essence, of Polish memory (national identity) first and foremost the outcome of an entanglement of heterogenic threads, which disentangled and viewed in isolation possess no distinctive qualities, they rather belong to a pan-human repertoire of beliefs, affects, and dispositions. And, if indeed it is so, then – thirdly – the strife to overcome contradictions, harmonize opinions, and reconcile disagreements seems to be an unrealistic, as well as a counterproductive, endeavor. This might be the case also for the very reason that what at first glance seems as a barrier and hindrance is the actual adhesive of societal endurance, and maybe even the source of its uniqueness and singularity. Whether we like it or not, this fierce antagonism which is incomprehensible for others – just as for us are the “everlasting” conflicts in the Balkans or the near and far East – the entanglement of mortal enemies in a rivalrous embrace (left with the right, Catholics and “freethinkers,” advocates of the national cause and those who fight for the global humanity or citizenry, the majority and the minorities, serfs and their masters, and so on) produces a space of communal – because they are clear to us – opposing justifications, whose agonistic affinities uphold, and in effect safeguard, the relative durability, unity, and duration of Polish shared memory.

If there is anything of value in these insights derived from three meta-memory metaphors diagnosing the effects of our submersion in the universe of communal memory, then the conclusions that are drawn from them are not at all optimistic. Landscapes of memory open up before us in ever different, novel, and intriguing forms but there is no escaping them: these are rooms without doors. The palimpsestic residues of the past eject to the surface, bring to awareness, and force the re-examination of forgotten scores of past wrongs, but the agora is usually too small for all of them to be voiced and heard. Moreover, the knots of memory are predominantly clusters of conflicts, tangles of unresolvable, and oftentimes incommensurate experiences, reasons, values, emotional ties – disentangling these knots could therefore unravel the community itself. It seems that there is no satisfactory (or maybe even any) way out of this world of memory.

Still, as an optimist who believes that there is always more than one answer to a given problem, I propose that in place of a depressing acknowledgement of the fact that there is no escaping the above predicament, we can look at it from another perspective. Because if there is no way to do away with the universe of our memory, then maybe it should finally be seen for what it is (in all its failings and shortcomings), with all the spectres and ghosts haunting it, to recognize the cultural capital that these represent, and to accept them as part of ourselves. Maybe then, without awaiting the coming of a memory-orientated ennui, our gaze, freed from

the compulsive fixation on the past, can finally be cast towards that which is in front – so that we can get a glimpse of what the future might hold for us.

Translated by Rafał Pawluk

Abstract

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This is an attempt to characterize the Polish culture of memory by drawing on three metaphors: memory as a landscape, memory as a palimpsest, memory as a knot.

Keywords

Polish memory, cultures of memory, politics of memory, national identity, divided community