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The Compulsion of Our Failure to Remember the Holocaust

TEKSTY DRUGIE 2023, NR 1, S. 64–79

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Controlled Amnesia

I would like to clarify the terms used in the title. I understand the intrusiveness of oblivion as a compulsion to construct forgetfulness. This forgetting is a form of controlled oblivion occurring as a defensive reaction. Thus, it is not simply forgetting, but a relegation to silence, often a *screen memory* that serves the collective memory of the past. However, it does serve a particular purpose insofar as memory is a sign of an ethnic identity that is allegedly under threat. Let me add without delay: it is the catastrophe of this memory and its pathogenic mechanism. On the other hand, this compulsive defense active here is an affectively enforced reaction but simultaneously complemented by a range of directed procedures, undertaken in the name of the manipulation. After all, in the process of remembering, there are constant transfers between the unconscious and consciousness and a redistribution of meanings emerging from both these orders. This insistence on compulsive but also consciously fabricated oblivion interests me as a mechanism active in constructing Polish memory of the Holocaust, that is the destruction of Poles' fellow citizens, Polish Jews, which took place in the years of Second World

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War. In dismantling this mechanism, it is worth considering Sigmund Freud's words about the purpose and chances of therapeutic proceedings. Freud was a pessimist and was guided by the belief that his patients would cope better with their neurosis if they transformed it into an ordinary sense of bad luck or unhappiness.¹ Why is it worth bearing in mind this aloofness of Freud as a therapist? The analysis leads to self-knowledge, which can be bitter knowledge, just like studying the historical past. Rather than looking for a reason to be proud, dealing with one's disasters and misfortunes is more critical so that the traumas associated with them do not recur. It is better to exist in the modern world as a sovereign, albeit unhappy subject, than to compensate for one's misfortunes at the cost of living in a false imagination.

In his study *Jews in Polish Culture* (1961), Aleksander Hertz analyzed the "Jewish question" as a "Polish question," that is as a problem that the Polish community had and has, in his view, with itself. This approach still seems appropriate. The emotions active in the word "Jew" seem to attest to the fact that, along with its use, strongly repressed contents come to the fore creating a tangle reminiscent of the infamous elf-lock (*plica polonica*). As is usually the case with such entanglements, they can only be dealt with indirectly.

"If a community's victim can be said to be its symptom, it then becomes evident that the community holds itself together by means of a vital attachment to an intense negative pleasure – or *jouissance*,"² notes Renata Salecl. However, "psychoanalysis has always held the subject responsible for his or her *jouissance*, beginning with Freud, who spoke of one's choice of neurosis."³ It is a Polish delight to cast oneself as a victim. Not only a victim of foreign violence but also a victim of a sinister conspiracy. And today, Poles are held hostage to their phantasmagorical condition more than they should be because they are still on the rope of their dark *jouissance*. To free themselves from

1 Freud concludes his essay *Psychotherapy of Hysteria* (1895) with an imaginary dialogue with a patient in which he says: "No doubt fate [meaning the "circumstances and events" of the patient's life – M. Z.] would find it easier than I do to relieve you of your illness. But you will be able to convince yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness." Quoted in Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Works*, ed. Ivan Smith (ebook, https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud_Complete_Works.pdf, 2000; 2007; 2010), 269. Jay M. Winter uses this remark by Freud to polemicize with Paul Ricoeur's conception of happy memory as a memory free from the trauma of hostility towards the former oppressor. Cf. Jay M. Winter, "Thinking About Silence," in *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Efrat Ben-Ze'ev et al. (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3–31.

2 Renata Salecl, *(Per)Versions of Love and Hate* (London–New York: Verso, 1998), 123.

3 *Ibid.*, 123.

it, they must recognize their symptom (which encodes their *jouissance*) and take responsibility for it. To become aware, therefore, of the reason why they choose “Jews” as their symptom, why they remain in the power of such reactions and behaviors and not others, and speak about it in the way they do.⁴

And these attitudes towards their fellow Jewish citizens seem to have remained unchanged since the end of the war. They consist of the memory of the Holocaust, which has been repressed and erased from the very beginning,⁵ the lightning-fast way in which Polish society succumbed to the propaganda of March ‘68, the outcry against Jan Tomasz Gross’s books and the scandalization of his speeches and articles,⁶ and the history of reactions to the *Jedwabne*

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- 4 Sociologists sometimes point here to the rivalry of Poles in the race of victims. Antoni Sułek notes that “underestimating the martyrdom of the Jews is not a matter of ignorance because Poles know very well that almost all Jews were murdered. Poles – and this is Ireneusz Krzemiński’s thesis – are supposed to compete with Jews for priority in suffering; it is supposed to give them a sense of moral superiority. Perhaps Poles do not so much want to be first in this race of victims as they do not want to be second, but in any case, their martyrdom during the war belongs to their social identity.” “Europe should recognize our right to this separate sacrifice, without speaking of it in the language of the competition,” wrote Paweł Śpiewak in a review of Tony Judt’s acclaimed book *Postwar*. In its epilogue, Judt concludes that “Jews were the main and almost the only victims of the war in Europe.” Antoni Sułek, “Zwykli Polacy patrzą na Żydów” [Ordinary Poles look at the Jews], *Nauka Polska* 1 (2010): 20–21.
- 5 See Zofia Wóycicka, *Przerwana żałoba: Polskie spory wokół pamięci nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych i zagłady 1944-1950* (Warszawa: Trio 2009) [English edition: *Arrested Mourning. Memory of the Nazi Camps in Poland, 1944-1950* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013)]; Grzegorz Niziołek, *Polski teatr Zagłady* [Polish theatre of the Holocaust] (Warszawa: Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute and Krytyka Polityczna, 2013); Barbara Törnquist-Plewa’s article “The Use and Non-use of the Holocaust Memory in Poland,” in *Painful Pasts and Useful Memories Remembering and Forgetting in Europe*, ed. Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Niklas Bernsand (Lund: Lund University, Centre for European Studies, 2012). It is worth mentioning here important publications on the topic which appeared after the publication of my article: Piotr Forecki, *Po Jedwabnem. Anatomia pamięci funkcjonalnej* [After Jedwabne. Anatomy of functional memory] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2018); Tomasz Żukowski, *Wielki retusz. Jak zapomnieliśmy, że Polacy zabijali Żydów* [The great retouch. How we forgot that Poles killed Jews] (Warszawa: Wielka Litera, 2019); *Opowieść o niewinności. Kategoria świadka Zagłady w kulturze polskiej* [A tale of innocence. The category of the witness to the Holocaust in Polish culture 1941-2015], ed. Maryla Hopfinger and Tomasz Żukowski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2020). Even earlier, however, an important contribution in this field was Joanna Tokarska-Bakir’s book *Rzeczy mgliste* [Vague things] (Sejny: Wydawnictwo Fundacja Pogranicze, 2004).
- 6 Particularly notable is the Polish reception of Gross’s column (posted on ProjectSyndicate and reprinted by, among others, *Die Welt*, in which Gross assumed that on the territory of Poland during the war the Poles killed more Jews than Germans, cf. Aleksandra Pawlicka and Jan Tomasz Gross, “O uchodźcach i polskim antysemityzmie,” *Newsseek*, September

crime, culminating in the aberrant speeches of the director of the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej) and the education minister questioning the findings of historians, or, finally, the attempt by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in 2018 to criminalize accusations by Poles of complicity in crimes against Jews.⁷ One would have to write here about the hate speech flooding online forums, but it is worth mentioning that even in the pre-internet era the situation was no different: after the publication of Błonski's essay "Biedny chrześcijanin patrzy na getto" [A poor Christian looks at the ghetto], the editors of *Tygodnik Powszechny* were inundated by a wave of disapproving, unprintable letters from outraged readers. If surveys are to be believed, antisemites are in the minority in Polish society.⁸ At the

22, 2015, accessed July 19, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.pl/polska/jan-tomasz-gross-o-tym-dlaczego-polacy-nie-chca-uchodzcow-debata-w-kp,artykuly,370968,1.html>.

- 7 Cf. "Kandydat na szefa IPN o Jedwabnem: Wykonawcami tej zbrodni byli Niemcy, którzy wykorzystali – pod przymusem grupkę Polaków" [Candidate for head of the Institute of National Remembrance on Jedwabne: The perpetrators of this atrocity were Germans who used a group of Poles under duress], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 19, 2016, accessed July 19, 2016, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75398,20424470,kandydat-na-szefa-ipn-o-jedwabnem-wykonawcami-tej-zbrodni-byli.html>; "Minister of Education Anna Zalewska on *Kropka nad i*" (TVN), TV-program, accessed July 13, 2016, <http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/anna-zalewska-w-kropce-nad-i-o-jedwabnem-i-pogromie-kieleckim,660799.html>. These speeches renewed the political and media debate on the Jedwabne and Kielce pogroms and their commemoration (not only Minister Zalewska's speech but also the protest of a group of historians and teachers, cf. "Wybitni historycy zajmujący się Zagładą protestują: Szokujące słowa o mordzie w Jedwabnem kompromitują Polskę" [Prominent Holocaust historians protest: Shocking words about the Jedwabne massacre bring Poland into disrepute], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 22, 2016, accessed March 2, 2022, <http://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,20437437,wybitni-historycy-zajmujacy-sie-zaglada-protestuja-szokujace.html>; and Justyna Suchecka, "Nauczyciele przeciw manipulowaniu historią. Ostry list po słowach Zalewskiej, Szarka, Chrzanowskiego" [Teachers against the manipulation of history. Harsh letter after the words of Zalewska, Szarek, Chrzanowski], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, accessed July 19, 2016, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75398,20483524,nauczyciele-przeciw-manipulowaniu-historia-ostry-list-po-slowach.html>. On the forthcoming law criminalizing accusations of Poles of complicity in crimes against Jews, cf. Dariusz Libionka and Michał Okoński, "Niepamięć narodowa" [National amnesia], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, February 6, 2018.
- 8 A 2015 Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) survey report shows that Poles' attitudes toward Jews have improved over the past 20 years. While in the first half of the 1990s more than three times as many people declared aversion to them than sympathy, the percentages have been similar for several years now. "Despite the improvement in attitudes towards Jews, they are still not among the nations most liked by Poles," it added. "Today, 32% of respondents refer to Jews with dislike and 28% with sympathy." Quoted by Joanna Guzik, "CBOS: Żydzi w czasie II wojny światowej doznali od Polaków więcej

same time, respondents declare that Jews did not suffer more during the war than Poles did.⁹ One does not need to be an antisemite to follow such a view.

dobrego niz złego" [CBOS: Jews experienced more good than bad from Poles during World War II], *Rzeczpospolita*, August 14, 2015, accessed July 13, 2016, <http://www.rp.pl/Historia/308149916-CBOS-Zydzi-w-czasie-II-wojny-swiatowej-doznali-od-Polakow-wiecej-dobrego-niz-zlego.html#p-1>.

- 9 As we read in the January 2008 issue of the weekly *Wprost*, "the discussion around Prof. Jan T. Gross's controversial book helps to understand the history of difficult Polish-Jewish relations, according to opinion polls. The Pentor Research Center, commissioned by *Wprost*, asked Poles about the wartime experience of both nations. We compared the results with a similar poll conducted by Demoskop in 1995. Thirteen years ago, almost half of respondents (49%) believed that Poles did enough to help Jews during Second World War, while 26% said they did as much as they could under the circumstances. Today, the proportions have reversed. Only 24% of respondents surveyed by Pentor have an unequivocally positive assessment of the scale of Poles' assistance to Jews. [...] Over 13 years, there has been little change in Poles' response to the question of who suffered more during the war: Poles or Jews. As in 1995, most of us believe that both nations suffered equally (in 1985 – 40%, in 2008 – 52%)," Katarzyna Nowicka, "Co myślimy o historii Polaków i Żydów?" [What do we think about the history of Poles and Jews?], *Wprost*, January 19, 2008, accessed July 13, 2016, <https://www.wprost.pl/forum/121842/16642/Pan-Gronomen-omen.html>. According to a 2015 CBOS survey, "currently 26% believe that Jews have suffered more good than bad from Poles. 44% believed that Jews have experienced as much good as bad, and 11% believe that they have experienced more bad than good. 19% have no opinion. [...] The dominant view was and still is that Poles have experienced as much good as bad from Jews – 49% think so today." CBOS also asked about reactions to "reports of crimes committed by Poles against Jews." These included: sympathy for the victims (36% of indications); condemnation of the perpetrators (34%); agitation that "people brought such a fate upon people" (29%); "shame that such crimes took place" (26%); indignation that "so much is said about the crimes of Poles against Jews, and not enough about Poles who saved Jews" (25%); anger at "those who slander the good name of Poland and Poles" (13%); indignation that "so much is said about Poles' crimes against Jews and nothing is said about Jews' crimes against Poles" (13%); doubt over "whether Poles were the perpetrators of such crimes" (11%) and ignorance "that Poles murdered Jews during the occupation" (9%). 5% expressed the opinion: "I don't care." The majority of respondents, 55%, are convinced that during the war, there were more "cases of Poles hiding and helping Jews than denouncing and murdering them." 22% believe that both attitudes were equally frequent. 7% are convinced that there was more "denouncing and murdering." 15% have no opinion. According to the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS), in the opinion of 71% of respondents, one should not forget "the murders and pogroms committed by Poles against Jews during and just after the war." At the same time, however, the prevailing view (48%) is that these were incidents that "should not be generalized." 23% believe that such incidents should be revealed and publicized, "so that we know the whole truth about ourselves." 22% believe that it is "ancient history" and "there is no need to open up old wounds." 7% "have no opinion." Quoted in: Guzik, *CBOS: Jews during World War II*.

Still, an observer of public discourse in Poland may wonder why the reactions of an aggressive “neurotic minority” are not met with more pronounced disapproval.

The Neurosis of Victims

The repetitive reactions make one think of their compulsive character, inherent in obsessive neurosis. In this case, the anger reflex seems to result from an internal compulsion. The subject feels compelled to act or think in this way, and even if he fights this force, he punishes himself for his lack of anger and feels that he is inevitably causing anxiety.¹⁰ This is the neurosis of a victim living in fear of facing accusations of being an abuser, and the shame turned into aggression. The affectivity of this defensive reaction stimulates the intoxication of the fatality of the Polish plight (the condition of the victim due to the conspiracy of strangers), reinforcing the obsessive structure and working toward self-victimization. Perverse victimization, after all, because pathos provides gratification. The role of the victim and the sense of injustice elevates. Defensive behavior becomes ritualized, especially in moments of presumed danger. The compulsiveness active here that enforces the refusal to accept historians’ findings as defamatory and untrue. Sigmund Freud, in his treatise “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” (1914), identifies the blocking of memories as the main reason for the difficulty in recalling traumatic experiences: the repetition compulsion causes a denial, a process originating in the unconscious whereby the subject exposes himself to unpleasant situations, thus repeating past experiences, but without recalling the original; on the contrary, he has the irresistible impression that current circumstances entirely condition his situation.¹¹ Freud says that the patient, instead of remembering and thus working through the content of the traumatic experience, merely repeats it, fixating on the pathological position. In the case of the outraged neurotic minority, the repressed “probes back into the present” in classic textbook mode: not only in the form of anguishing thoughts and images but also in the manner of acting-out actions – for example, in the form of discursive engagement with traumatizing content, in hate speech, in statements in defense of Poland’s allegedly defamed good name, and so on. These behaviors have the typical character of a repetition of trauma in “transference” (the Big

¹⁰ See Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, “Compulsion,” entry in *Language of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Karnac Books, 1996), 77.

¹¹ Freud, *Collected Works*, 2496–2507.

Other plays the role of the analyst here, anyhow selectively identified with the community they affirm or with the – as much demagogically as simplistically understood – high court of public opinion, which will not remain deaf to the injustice of the unjustly accused). Thus, they are more a symptom of the disease than they belong to the therapeutic process, that is true transference, identified with working through the trauma. All the more so because the affective economy is still active here, according to which – as Freud also wrote in later works – underneath the publicly manifested suffering of the “unfairly” accused is the fulfilment of a desire (here: the dark *jouissance* of being a victim). The obsessively repeated ritual of defiance becomes a pathological mechanism that preserves the victim syndrome and the phantasm of victim-harm paralyzing communication. Further working in favor of its impossibility is the politics of memory, which is defensively chosen by the collective due to an aggressive, neurotic minority. The official version of collective memory promotes a particularistic interpretation of the past and blurs the truth of historical experience. And it is precisely the case that in Poland recently an ethnic interpretation of the memory of the Holocaust, serving national interests, has been staged and pushed. What we are dealing with is the Polonization of the memory of the Holocaust, which is part of the “frenzy of commemoration” leading to the “confiscation of memory” and abuses consisting of “placing oneself in the position of the victim” – to use Paul Ricoeur’s phrase, which for us takes on a familiar content.¹²

Meanwhile, in Europe and the world, precisely when it comes to the memory of the Holocaust, we observe, according to researchers, the opposite tendencies: particularistic historical policies are weakening, and “the new space of Holocaust memory is slowly becoming a cosmopolitan” and universal space.¹³ In the case of Poland, however, that is not the way it is. As we read in Michael Rothberg’s book, histories of victimization of various ethnic groups, in which rival collective memories come to the fore, often – especially where there are post-colonial dependencies (and this is the situation we faced in the People’s Republic of Poland, a state under foreign domination) – “take the form of a zero-sum struggle for pre-eminence.”¹⁴ The multidirectional remembrance Rothberg seeks is that representations

12 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 86.

13 Cf. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, “Holocaust jako polityka historyczna,” in *(Kon)teksty pamięci*, ed. Kornelia Kończal (Warszawa, Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2014), 171 [original printout: Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *Erinnerung im Globalen Zeitalter der Holocaust* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), 134–146.]

14 Michael Rothberg, *Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3.

of the Holocaust transcend the time and space of what they represent, begin to live their own lives, become the basis of post-memory-dominated collective remembering, are pluralistic and constitute a polyphony of interpretive communities, while in Poland, not counting academic centers such as the Holocaust Research Center of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IFIS PAN), the Jewish Historical Institute, the Museum of Polish Jews, and – until recently! – the Institute of National Remembrance, the public discourse is dominated by repetitions of competing narratives. So after a period of pluralized discourse on the Holocaust, culminating in 2002 with the official commemoration of the victims of the Jedwabne massacre, with the participation of the then Polish president, not only is this beginning to look disturbingly reminiscent of the “separate” and “nationalized orders of remembering” (the “Polish” and “Jewish” mourning) already initiated immediately after the war, of which Wóycicka wrote, but it also threatens to create an inter-generational memory gap, furnished by worn-out phantasms. Collective memory inhabits a landscape of controlled forgetting. But this does not mean it constitutes a space submitted to total control. According to Freud, the imperative of nonmemory does not remove traumatizing events from the unconscious, where memory resides. Forgetting, therefore, does not erase what outrages members of the community, who inherit memory by acquiring identity through a process of identifying with the national past. And most importantly, it is not at all relevant whether these experiences are personally lived by or whether their content is absorbed secondarily in the process of participation in the life of the community. After all, as is well known, representations of traumatic memories are not associated with past events or objects of memory, but with their present experience. Those taking part in the conversation about the emotionally stirring past are in the position of participants in the performance who, in the words of Jill Bennett, act out their feelings toward each other.¹⁵ Precisely because of this, the memory of those of the second and third generations has so much affective character as that of the generation of participants and witnesses. They too, therefore, are being subjected to a compulsion for compulsive repetitions.¹⁶

15 Jill Bennett, *Emphatic Vision. Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 24.

16 “So-called traumatic memory carries the experience into the present and future in that the events are compulsively relived or re-experienced as if there were no distance or difference between past and present,” writes Dominick La Capra in his book *History in Transit. Experience, Identity, and Critical Theory* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 55–56.

Shame Transformed into Aggression

“The rule in history seems to be that one protects one’s pride after disasters,” notes Christian Meier.¹⁷ But why is knowing an infamous and embarrassing past so difficult to accept? We do not choose individual memory, but we join collective memory. However, we do it on terms most often not set by ourselves. As Wulf Kansteiner emphasizes, “Collective memory seems to reside not in the perceiving consciousness, but in the material, in the practices and institutions of social and psychic life that function within us, but, strangely enough, do not seem to need either our participation or our loyalty.”¹⁸ These practices and institutions that furnish collective memory embody the lacanian Big Other. We make accession to collective memory precisely in the way that our engagement is a response to the interpellation of the Big Other and an attempt to answer the question of who I am. An attack on the content sanctioned by collective memory arouses fear and horror because it attacks the Big Other. If we are accused and shamed, then by the same token, the Other in us is charged and the Big Other in us is shamed. As Renata Salecl notes, shame is the effect of the subject’s insecurity and confusion and the undermining or crashing of authority, the specter of the Big Other’s shortcomings... “When I feel ashamed, it is not simply that I am trying to avoid the disapproving gaze of the Other in front of whom I feel humiliated. By averting my own gaze, I am also trying not to see the fact that the Other is itself also inconsistent, or, better, that the Other, in the final analysis, does not exist.”¹⁹

No wonder, then, that we defend ourselves against accusations and try to avoid the feeling of shame. With shame comes anxiety, which, as Salecl points out, concerns the most important things to us: the subject no longer experiences himself as the fulfilment of the Big Other’s desire, so we become helpless and abandoned: what furnished our world collapses into rubble. Such a situation leads to important consequences. Although the question of responsibility considered on the grounds of collective memory does not abstract from individual causality, for the community, the memory of its crimes becomes particularly acute as it touches on national identity. The community participant accused of the crime, the descendant of the culprits of that crime,

17 Christian Meier, “Pamiętanie – wypieranie – zapominanie / Erinnern – Vdrängen – Vergessen,” in *Das Verschwinden der Gegenwart: über Geschichte und Politik* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001), 709.

18 Wulf Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies,” *History and Theory* 41 (2002): 179–197. See <https://orbankat.web.elte.hu/emlekezeti/Kansteiner.pdf>.

19 Renata Salecl, “Nobody home,” *Cabinet* 31 (Fall) (2008), accessed July 20, 2016, <http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/31/salecl.php>.

henceforth the depositor of collective guilt, is put in a situation that forces him to question his own identity and – in the case that interests us here – the identity of the community of the innocent victims of history. Confronting the accusation forces the accused community to “shatter the phantasmagorical scenario that sustains its identity.”²⁰ The threatened object is “the un-symbolizable kernel in the other: *object a* – the object cause of desire [here: eternally threatened by history Polishness as the foundation of community identity – M. Z.]. It is around this object that the subject forms its fantasy, its scenario of provisional wholeness,” Salecl says. Its kernel, therefore, remains that which, being difficult to symbolize and articulate, refers to the endless array of its substitutions appearing in public discourse. The conversation is difficult precisely because “each person’s identity has its roots in the *object a*, so the slandered person cannot offer a defense through recourse to the ‘truth’ or to critique of the ideology that underpins the slanderer’s attack” – rational and affective orders are mixed in the discourse. As we read in Salecl, the reason that accusatory speech that harms the *object a* as the foundation of identity is so hurtful and so insidious, in the opinion of the accused, because it takes advantage of his structural vulnerability, so to speak: he feels stabbed in what is dearest to him and difficult to articulate.

Such a situation seems to be how the arguments of those who describe the situation in a way not to the liking of the community’s defenders are received – see the reaction to the books of Jan Tomasz Gross, whose theses are, after all, supported by some historians in Poland.²¹ But that’s just it – only some

20 Salecl, (*Per*)*Versions of Love and Hate*, 120.

21 Marcin Zaremba wrote: “The authors [Jan Tomasz Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross, authors of *The Golden Harvest. Events on the Periphery of the Holocaust* – M. Z.] estimate that tens of thousands of Jews were murdered by Poles after 1942. We know, and it is documented, that they killed at least a thousand Jews and handed over several thousand to the Germans. The Polish Holocaust historian community shares the belief that these numbers are only the tip of the iceberg. Research is ongoing. We know that about 200–250,000 Jews escaped from ghettos and train cars bound for the death camps. About 40–60,000 survived. So what happened to the rest? Did they all die at the hands of Poles? [...] Some percentage must be put down to a natural cause of death. [...] Even if as many as half (which is improbable) of the hiding Jews died of exhaustion, disease, and lack of medicine, it would not change the meaning of the crime. [...] Let’s assume, however, that the Grosses are right and that, indeed, tens of thousands of Jews were killed by Poles with pitchforks and axes or handed over to the Germans. This number exceeds the German personnel losses in the September campaign (17,000 killed) and – significantly – the number of fallen Wehrmacht soldiers in the Warsaw Uprising (more than 2,000). I do not know the estimates of the losses suffered by the Germans in occupied Poland from October 1939 to the summer of 1944, i.e. until Operation “Burza” [Tempest]. However, it is impossible that they exceeded 3,000. What are the implications of the numbers cited by

of them. Immediately there were other historians (not to mention columnists) who treated his books as biased, academically worthless, and written under foreign inspiration, leading a Polish minister to say on TV that the participation of Poles in the Jedwabne crime was just a “liberal interpretation.” More relevant is the reaction to the books of those who, while making a description, try to provide tools to help disarm the trauma and, at the same time, the phantasm. I am referring to Andrzej Leder, who, in his book *Prześniona rewolucja* [The Sleepwalkers’ Revolution] and interviews given after its publication, emphasized that for historical reasons, there is a sense of injustice in Poles, both those with their origins in post-noble culture and those derived from post-peasant culture, and this sense is an identity-building factor and a major political emotion: “two events from which, in addition, a large part of society profited”: that is “the unworked-through witnessing the Holocaust of the Jews” (which experience “was much more common than, for example, participation in the Resistance”), as well as the experience of “witnessing what happened after 1945, that is, the shattering of the old social structure by the Communists and Russians, the civil war, the annihilation of the landed gentry, the terror” “left a residue of guilt, paradoxically fueling a sense of injustice.”²² The mechanism of these traumatizing events, fueled by the fantasy of historical justice, explains why forgotten acts of physical and symbolic violence continue to take their toll today in the form of the persistence of a persecutory antisemitic phantasm. At its root, according to Leder, we find the past of a large part of today’s Polish middle class sent back into oblivion: the denial of its involvement in the Holocaust, experiencing it as “transpassive” and therefore unreal (experiencing one’s action as occurring through the mediation of someone else action, and action undertaken not on one’s behalf).²³ So other evil-doers were active there: the responsibil-

the Grosses? No more and no less, such that we were, or at least the peasant part of our society, not on the side we thought we were on, since we killed more Jews than Germans [...]. The Grosses force us this time to admit that Poles had blood on their hands during the war. And in the name of what? Golden teeth. It discredits our heroic story of sacrifice.” Marcin Zaremba, “Biedni Polacy na żniwach” [Poor Poles at the harvest], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, January 17, 2011, accessed July 20, 2016, http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,8951226,Biedni_Polacy_na_zniwach___Recenzja__Zlotych_Zniw_.html,

22 “Nasze krzywdy i winy. Andrzej Leder o polskiej duszy i poczuciu skrzywdzenia. Jerzy Baczyński, Edwin Bendyk, Ewa Wilk w rozmowie z Andrzejem Lederem” [Our wrongs and guilt. Andrzej Leder on the Polish soul and the feeling of being wronged. Jerzy Baczyński, Edwin Bendyk, Ewa Wilk in conversation with Andrzej Leder], *Polityka*, October 6, 2016, accessed August 10, 2016, <http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1635741,1,prof-andrzej-leder-o-polskiej-duszy-i-poczuciu-skrzywdzenia>.

23 This experience is “accompanied at the same time by a peculiar sense of passivity and resembles the situation of someone in a dream. Everything happens, but as if by itself,

ity for active participation in the murder, a forbidden pleasure and, at the same time horror, was delegated to the Germans, which relieved the guilt of Poles. As Leder says, speaking the language of Lacan, the native perpetrators transferred their desire to the Germans. They transferred it at the same time to the Other, being the instrument of historical justice, which does not mean that the real position of co-perpetrators and witnesses, however passively experienced, did not remain a function of the affects deposited in the phantasm of the Jew – the figure of the sinister stranger. By someone else's endowment we came into possession of what was, as it were, due to us and from which we were deceitfully deprived of in the course of history. After the war, many quoted a phrase: "What we suffered is what we suffered, but Hitler at least freed Poland from the Jews" – it seemed to express this attitude. In this process of historical adjustment of accounts of wrongs, we used to qualify our faults as involuntary and marginal (allegedly, the "criminal fringe" that was active in the persecution of fellow Jewish citizens). Still, the constantly repressed memory of it did not cease to be an issue. Another obscured our adventure: the Polish community regarded the post-war seizure of German property and taking the place of the Germans, at large, as an act of historical justice, a fair punishment for bringing about the war. Leder's readers claiming to be representatives of the national majority generally did not engage in scholarly polemics; they simply belittled the book as a rambling, obscure argument of dubious authority relying on fabrications.²⁴ It did not become a topic of conversation in right-wing newspapers and websites.

apart from subjective control, which involves a sense of the agency of one's actions, which is called will": Andrzej Leder, *Prześniona rewolucja* [The sleepwalkers' revolution] (Warszawa: Krytyka Polityczna Publishing House, 2014), 21–22.

- ²⁴ Cf. Andrzej Horubala, "Nieswiadome zbrodnie Polaków" [Unconscious crimes of Poles], *Do Rzeczy* 3 (2014), accessed August 10, 2016, <http://dorzeczy.pl/kultura/id,3482/Nieswiadome-zbrodnie-Polakow.html>. A reviewer for *Teologia Polityczna* found Leder's book, "which the right lacks" – as he wrote, found it both "rambling" and "not free of ideological bias." Cf. Paweł Rzewuski "Na marginesie. Andrzej Leder, *Prześniona rewolucja*" [In the margins. Andrzej Leder, *Prześniona Rewolucja*], *Political Theology* 6 (2014): 20. A more insightful polemic was also published, yet this concerned not the criminal but the economic aspect of the transfer described by Leder. "Leder failed to see the elephant in the room, failed to see that the annexation of eastern German lands, the forcible, violently carried-out displacement of 10 million Germans and the enfranchisement of their property was a great national-social and geographic-spatial revolution! And it was not an 'overhyped revolution.'" Cf. Tomasz Gabiś, "Polska klasa średnia, *erwache!* Albo co prześnił Andrzej Leder [Polish middle class, *erwache!*, or what Andrzej Leder oversaw], accessed August 10, 2016, <http://nowadebata.pl/2016/07/29/polish-middle-class-erwache-albo-co-przesnil-andrzej-leder/>.

How to Get Out of It?

Is there, then, any way out of a no-win situation? Is it possible to get out of the vicious circle of compulsive repetition? Vicious because compulsive repetition of unpleasant or painful situations, considered an indisputable fact visible in analytical experience, has its inexhaustible sources in collective unconsciousness.²⁵ As the Lacanists say, there is no end to repetition. However, one can add that the recommendation “Enjoy your symptom” sounds here somewhat inappropriate and at odds with the line of thinking of Freud himself, who, in the aforementioned text on recollection, wrote: “young and childish people in particular, are inclined to make the necessity imposed by the treatment for paying attention to their illness as a welcome excuse for luxuriating in their symptoms.” In his article, Freud considered nothing less than the courage with which the patient is willing to resist his illness as a condition for successful treatment. It is easier to get out of the vicious circle of repetition for the individual who decides to undergo labor-intensive (not to mention: costly) therapy than for the collective fixated on victim positions and driven with anger and fears.²⁶ Social psychologists draw attention to the persistence of the long-standing psychological trauma of war. They mention the memory of the daily threat to life, the frequent confrontation with another person's death – the trauma which has not been healed in Poland. They claim it is responsible for the career of paranoid thinking, social mistrust, and the ease with which hate speech manifests itself. A significant role is therapy via public discourse. But here, too, a lucky therapeutic “transfer” is a requirement: put into the realities and conditions of debate, this means, at the very least, a willingness to talk and a shared appreciation of the standards for evaluating the arguments used in it. In this case, public therapeutic discourse appears to be a work of Herculean proportions, and it seems doomed to failure: it is assumed today as an attack and a lie, recently completely unsupported by state institutions, even disavowed by them as a defamation of the national community. In effect, we witness the rejection of the discourse as a platform for agreeing on perspectives and arguments. Is it because “it is not fair to talk to people who call themselves Poles, but are no longer Poles”?²⁷ Meanwhile,

25 See Laplanche and Pontalis, *Language of Psychoanalysis*, 77.

26 See Paweł Holas and Maja Lis-Turlejska, “A w głowach wojna trwa” [And in their heads the war continues], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, May 14–15, 2016. The psychologists' diagnoses did not find in Poland any implementation of a therapy program on a societal scale (just as the Polish historians' declared knowledge of the Jedwabne crime long before the publication of J. T. Gross's book never turned into a debate initiated by them).

27 “Rymkiewicz w bardzo ważnej rozmowie z Lichočką: Polacy zrozumieli, że są wynaradawiani, że to wszystko zmierza do likwidacji Polski” [The Poles understood that they were

discourse is crucial here, as it is an instrument for changes in social memory. It is an acknowledged truth by scholars that “public handling of memory also affects individual memory, repression can therefore contribute to forgetting” and “nations can repress the past with impunity, their collective memory can be changed without the ‘return of the repressed’”²⁸ – although that latter thesis is already questionable. Regardless of its unconscious entanglements, the public memory healing process depends on representations of the past constructed by centers of power in such a way that individuals “perceive them as their own.” The role of institutions of public trust in particular, such as academic or educational institutions, is therefore of great importance here, especially since the specific representations of the past that permeate the public sphere “embody the social, political or institutional intentionality that supports or enables it.”²⁹ In his book *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur devoted much attention to the resolution of the affective conflict of blocked and manipulated memory. And also the conditions under which the assimilation of repressed contents can occur, so that this process serves to settle the dispute of conflicting memories. At the center of his considerations is the capacity to forget, albeit as the actual outcome of a whole process. In place of institutionalized memory, which is therefore often exposed to the risk of abuse, Ricoeur proposes the instauration of the work of memory as understood by Freud. This work of memory, exposed to the risk of not being

being denationalized, that all this was heading towards the liquidation of Poland. Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz in conversation with Joanna Lichočka], *W polityce*, accessed August 20, 2016, <http://wpolityce.pl/kultura/280770-rymkiewicz-w-bardzo-waznej-rozmowie-z-lichocka-polacy-zrozumieli-ze-sa-wynaradawiani-ze-to-wszystko-zmierz-a-do-likwidacji-polski-calosc>. One might add here that one of the effects of the Law and Justice government’s remembrance policy is that there is no change in attitudes when it comes to the issue of antisemitism in Poland. See research by the team of Michał Bilewicz from the School of Social Sciences and Humanities (SWPS): Dominika Bulska and Mikołaj Winiewski, “Powrót Zabobonu: Antysemitizm w Polsce na podstawie Polskiego Sondażu Upzędzeń 3” [The Return of Superstition: Anti-Semitism in Poland based on the Polish Prejudice Survey 3], accessed March 3, 2022, cf. http://cbu.psychologia.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/410/2021/02/Antysemityzm_PPS3_Bulska_fin.pdf “Our research – shows that the percentage of people with antisemitic beliefs is not changing. What is changing is the expression of antisemitism. Those who hold such views are less ashamed of them, which is facilitated by social media,” says Prof. Michał Bilewicz of the University of Warsaw’s Center for Research on Prejudice in Wiktor Ferfecki, “Antysemiticki problem w Polsce,” *Rzeczpospolita*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.rp.pl/spoleczenstwo/art8610461-antysemiticki-problem-w-polsce> UW. Author’s note of April 3, 2023.

28 Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory,” 9.

29 *Ibid.*

free from pressure and manipulation, must – if it is to achieve its goal – be accompanied by the work of mourning, identified here with remembering, mourning that is the acceptance of the loss of an object dear to us (the words of Freud quoted earlier about accepting the feeling of unhappiness can also be understood in this sense). When doing our work of mourning, we should therefore develop the capacity to empathize with our opponents to move towards reconciliation, culminating in – as he calls it – “happy forgetting.” Thus, forgetting is not amnesia or oblivion. It is an amnesty, an “amnesty-ing pardon,” but the conditions under which it takes place are essential. The work of memory/mourning should produce tangible results. “The question of forgiving arises where there has been an indictment, a finding of guilt, and sentencing,” says Ricoeur.³⁰ “The salutary identity crisis that permits a lucid reappropriation of the past and of its traumatic charge” is also important, and this is done precisely through the work of memory, “which work is completed by the work of mourning and guided by the spirit of forgiveness.”³¹ It is, therefore, a forgetting that is not the forgetting of wrongs, but “as a duty to silence evil but to state it in a pacified mode, without anger,” a forgetting that is the will for reconciliation. This process would undoubtedly prove easier and would have a greater chance of success if the world morally compensated Poland for the enormous suffering in Second World War and for the losses it sustained.³² Unfortunately, the forgetting and ignorance we face in the West in this regard does not herald this: the words cited above (see footnote 4) by Tony Judt, after all a significant historian and intellectual, are symptomatic here. But if we were finally to stand in the limelight, would this not just reinforce the Polish victim syndrome? One probably does not have to be as much of a Freudian pessimist to conclude that, under the conditions in which the discourse on memory is taking place in Poland today, Ricoeur’s project, or one such as that of Michael Rothberg, is proving impossible. As readers of philosophers, we are used to failure. The *w o r s e* thing is that the Pole will remain a sick man of Europe; the *w o r s t* thing is that he will enjoy it.

30 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 453.

31 Ibid.

32 Poland lost 17.1% of its citizens; the number of Polish Jewish victims is roughly equal to that of other Polish victims. By this measure, as well as in destroying of material property, Poland ranks second, after the USSR, among the countries involved in the war. Poland and the USSR accounted for as much as 71% of the damage on the continent. Cf. Mirosław Maciorowski, “Ile milionów zginęło?” [How many millions died?], *Gazeta Wyborcza – Ale Historia*, May 4, 2016, accessed August 26, 2016, http://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/1,121681,17844725,ile_milionow_zginelo__Ofiary_II_wojny_swiatowej.html.

Abstract

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The Compulsion of Our Failure to Remember the Holocaust

Zaleski describes the pathogenic mechanisms that come into play in Polish society: in the processes of forgetting the extermination of our fellow citizens, Polish Jews, during the Second World War, as well in the reasons behind the construction of a false historical imagination/imaginary of collective memory. In the Polish affective memory, "the Jews" are a symptom that allows a noisy "neurotic minority" to cast the collective in the role of victim, to give permanence of phantasms and pathological structures in our collective identity. Zaleski also expresses his alarm at the fact that official public discourse is now once again sanctioning these practices.

Keywords

Antisemitism, affect, phantasm, collective memory, identity