

# BETWEEN CULTURAL MEMORY AND COMMUNICATIVE MEMORY – THE DILEMMAS OF RECONSTRUCTION OF ANNIHILATED PAST OF POLISH JEWS

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*Abstract:* This text presents briefly some of the elements of Polish discourse about collective memory of Holocaust during transformations. I refer to Assmann's concept of communicative and cultural memories, which seems to help to explain the phenomenon of present memory, which can be observed. This text concentrates not on Polish memory of annihilation of Jews (so different from the memory of victims or perpetrators, not to mention different memory of other nations) but on its internal divisions and dilemmas which it generates. Along with war generation passing away, the decisive role of creating Polish memory about Shoah will be taken over by specialised institutions and rituals commemorating the past. In the early post-war period the transfer of memory happened mainly by the witness. The role of specialised institutions was marginal. From the beginning of XX century along with last witnesses passing away, the memory of Shoah became the focus of institutions (scientific institutions gathering documents including witnesses' reports and anniversaries). It is a very important moment to look again at the memory distrib-

uted from the roots and confront it with models and standards of commemorating the past, which will create the memory of the next generations.

*Keywords:* cultural memory, communicative memory, Holocaust, Poland

## I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important feature of transformations of Polish collective memory after the collapse of communism in 1989 was gradual and systematic discovery and adaptation of many elements about the past of Polish Jews. Although due to common centuries-old history of both nations, this memory can be considered to be an integral part of Polish memory, the war period and almost half-century-old communistic period caused its huge transformation, often eliminat-

ing it completely from the awareness of many Poles. Lives and annihilation of once the most numerous minority existing in Poland, came back after almost 50 years after the end of war into the public discourse focusing mainly on difficult relationships between Poles and Jews. This process, which was easy to predict, not only has not proceeded peacefully and painlessly but it is also not coming to an end soon.

The debate about Polish-Jewish relationships could openly begin only after 1989. Previous attempts, for example a debate on Lanzmann "Shoah" film, were politically determined and what is more the circumstances did not help by censorship and playing the Jewish card by authorities of those days. This and later debates, after Poland entered democratic transformations, were characterised by a paradox. During almost the whole period of transformations they were included into the mainstream reflection on Polish memory looking for the tradition of an independent country of Poland. Those debates generated also radical attitudes and evoked strong social emotions. Simultaneously, however, they referred to a minority which nowadays exists in Poland only in religious micro-societies and only in biggest cities and the total population of people declaring Jewish ancestry never exceeds a fraction of one per cent. The paradox refers not to the present times but mainly to the past, mainly the events of the 30s and 40s of XX century, which changed the character of relations between those two nations forever. Once the history is analysed, the huge gap between the diversity of pre-war society and the richness of their culture, and the picture of the least populated minority in Poland can be seen. There are still too few bridges over this gap which might link those two so different realities for the present genera-

tions of Poles and Jews. The motivation for building such bridges are not always noble and "memory to remember" very often gives away to "memory for benefit" or "memory for oblivion" (Michlic 2011).

One of the element of the series of debates in Poland after 1989, and mainly after 2000, so after the publication of Jan T. Gross's work *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Gross 2000), is memory of a very difficult common past, when the fundamental images of Poles about their own history are verified. The process of polemics here is inevitable. Any attempt to understand Polish identity, to analyse Polish history and to refer to Polish culture will reveal the coexistence of Jewish neighbours, an integral element of Poland for almost eight centuries. A huge influence of the culture of Polish Jews on Polish culture and relationships very often make it impossible to determine a clear division. It is also impossible to separate Polish history from history of Polish Jews, once the biggest and the most vital of all societies of Jews in Europe. The history and memory of Polish Jews were inseparable elements of Polish reality at least to the end of the 30s of XX century, reflected in many symbolic areas of cities, towns and villages. This past was almost completely crossed out by German policy of the "ultimate solution" during the II world war.

Today, the memory of the past of Polish Jews still exists but the number of its depositories as well as places where it is cultivated, is incomparably smaller. The traces of the existence of then neighbours can be found in devastated commentaries and synagogues which are adapted for new uses and many forgotten places of then life and annihilation. The richness of common relations between Poles and Jews (both posi-

tive and negative) is still undiscovered and often forgotten. The return to the past has to generate questions about what in those common relations was difficult, what divides those nations. Next generations of Poles enter adolescence. The topic of Jews means little for them, and if anything, they are stereotypes, simplified statement taken from history lessons not always coherent and often chaotic or heard here and there.

The issue of Jews also exists inseparably in the public discourse and mainly refers to attitudes of Poles towards Jews. The topic of "anti-Semitism without the Jews" is a permanent element of analysis not only of publicists and journalists but also of research of sociologists, culture experts and anthropologists. Even though memory of lives and annihilation of Polish Jews is an immanent part of the cultural and historical discourse of Polish elite and, although the most important places of annihilation have been well commemorated, on the daily basis we still witness emptiness, indifference, stereotypes and misrepresentations of average Poles. Many sociological research conducted in Poland has constantly been revealing the problem of prejudice against Jews, lack of knowledge and often radical anti-Semitism. Although some of the research show little positive changes in this matter, breaking out of the circle seems to be possible only in the distant future (Krzemiński 2004).

A question that should naturally follow after analysing the above phenomenon is, how to build bridges between the past and the present and future. How can memory about the past be restored and how to understand present situation and explain present attitudes of Poles towards a nation which not so long ago was out closest neighbour, but today is just occasional visitor who wants just to see the Shoah places. It appears

that building such bridges is possible even by lively actions of commemoration and exploration of common past only if the whole truth about the common past is told and lessons on even the most painful memory are taught. Only such a base will allow to build common future and relations of young generations of Poles and Jews.

Last decades were not a dry period when talking about restoring memory of Jews. The memory about annihilated society of Polish Jews is constantly disappearing as the last witnesses of the tragic war events are passing away. It is restored, however, on other fields where the main role is played by "material witnesses" of then live and annihilation. We need to be aware of the fact that the last witnesses of that past are still alive. This is the last moment to contact them, recreate the pictures from the past, even if such pictures are far different from what we would like to cultivate and give as an example. Those pictures have lived in the witnesses of pre-war coexistence and of the tragedy of the war for the last 70-80 years and have been undoubtedly passed on to these generations which now decide about the shape of the national debate on the past and memory about it. These messages contain images of following generations and images which live in Poles nowadays and will probably be passed on to their descendants.

Reconstruction of images of Jews and their history that exist in Polish society is not easy. One of the problem is capturing the complex web of various means of distribution, which form these images. Around the beginning of XX century the period, when the main source of information about the past was the family and memories of ancestors or the church, finished. Nowadays our images are formed not only by stories

of our grandfathers. There is school, mass media, and new media. It creates unsolved dilemmas but, at the same time, various areas for research. This situation causes one more, possibly the most serious dilemma, which is discussed in this text. How to bring together such different realities of memory distribution where one is being formed constantly by messages and experience of less and less numerous, but still existing, Polish witnesses of annihilation. The other one formed by habitual and formal ceremonies and official rituals. This dilemma – *let mi stress* – refers not only to the topic of Polish-Jewish relationships but also to many historic experiences which exist in the memory of societies of many nations and which are constantly commemorated.

In this case, however, the situation seems to be unique and it should make everyone who examines the society think, especially when listen to memories of the eldest citizens who remember Polish reality before 1939 and during war and observe official message integrated in the present policy of our country. This message refers not only to a very unique event from the history of mankind, which is the Holocaust, but also to the specific category of witnesses of annihilation of the Jews. Those witnesses were not always able to take part in a discussion, not always wanted to talk about it, people who could not always talk.

## II. COMMUNICATIVE AND CULTURAL MEMORY

At the end of XX and beginning of XXI century we still experience two important ways of transfer of memory about the II world war and Shoah. The former are the witnesses of the war and their reports, the

latter is the official message of public institutions integrated in the policies of many, not only European, countries. The role of such policies is different and depends on historic experience of each country, the meaning of the annihilation of Jews. So, the status of memory about Shoah in case of Izreal is different than in case of the USA or Poland or other European countries. This process, in case of Poland, can be observed by referring to the Assmann's concept of communicative and cultural memories.

The categories that he suggested seem to be not only useful but they also suit a specific historic context, where we still witness communicative and cultural memories, and gradual replacement of the one by the other.

Let me briefly present the main assumptions of the above mentioned theory. According to Assmann, the communicative and cultural memories are built on a pole structure, while: „The communicative memory comprises memories related to the recent past. These are what the individual shares with his contemporaries. A typical instance would be generational memory that accrues within the group, originating and disappearing with time or, to be more precise, with its carriers. Once those who embodied it have died, it gives way to a new memory” (Assmann 2011: 36). He also claims that the communicative memory reaches maximum 3-4 generations back. The carriers of such memory are *nonspecific, contemporary witnesses within a memory community*. Apart from communicative memory there is so called - *floating gap* - an area of official message – course books and monuments.

The cultural memory, however, is based on institutional remembering: “Cultural memory, then, focuses on fixed points in the past, but again it is unable to preserve the past as it was. This tends to be condensed

into symbolic figures to which memory attaches itself (...) Myths are also figures of memory, and here any distinction between myth and history is eliminated. What counts for cultural memory is not factual but remembered history. One might even say that cultural memory transforms factual into remembered history, thus turning it into myth (...) Through memory, history becomes myth. This does not make it unreal – on the contrary, this is what makes it real, in the sense that it becomes a lasting, normative, and formative power”. (Assmann 2011: 37-38). In cultural memory exists a sacred element and it has specialised carriers: priests, artist, teachers and memory guards.

According to Assmann: “One might therefore compare the polarity between communicative and cultural memory to that between everyday life and the festival, and perhaps even speak of everyday memory and festival memory” (Assmann 2011: 38). Despite the fact, that in present societies the processes of both memories are parallel and they overlap, it is undeniable, that we are nowadays on the border between those memories. The communicative memory of witnesses of war and annihilation is passing (it lasts only as electronic copies) and the memories of last war and Shoah will become mainly the part of cultural memory.

The role of above mentioned electronic reports of witnesses of the war trauma (the best known is the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation initiative) deserves my attention. Even though such accounts are the records of communicative memory, in the future they will become the most important evidence of cultural memory. Such records, located in many specialised institutions are not available to the public and even if they are, either through the Internet or in museums, they are made accessible by using a

particular key (it would be difficult to put thousands of hours of reports and memories on the Internet). These memories concentrate on particular aspects, and are very often prepared according to scenarios created by specialists and, that is why, the emotions that should come from the relationship listener – witness disappear, not to mention family reports of parents and grandparents.

Coming back to Assmann’s distinction, two key questions should be asked: What elements connected with Polish-Jewish relations exist in Polish communicative memory? And: What elements dominate the cultural memory? The answer to the former question is possible by referring to the memory of generations of people who witnessed the reality of last years of an independent country before 1939 and the war. The research conducted among those who remember those days show the dominance of memory connected with everyday coexistence of Poles and Jews and Jewish trade and religion (Łaguna-Raszkievicz 2012). In the memory of Poles who had direct contact with Jews still exist names of Jewish holidays, details of their clothing and religious traditions. Very important memories are those of Jewish trade. In such memories there are very often negative opinions. A permanent element of memories of pre-war period is anti-Jewish riots and an increase of anti-Semitic attitudes which resulted in, for instance, boycotts of Jewish shops. It is easy to notice that those elements of the past are not willingly mentioned while commemorating the past during important, official event and anniversaries.

Those research corroborate Assmann’s thesis about three-generation perspective of outlook on the past. In the memories of witnesses the elements prior

to the pre-war reality, a couple of centuries of co-existence and intense social and cultural relations, are disappearing. On the other hand, such memory passed on and undoubtedly existing in younger generations of Poles includes more "rough" and less monumental reality which is not included in Polish course books or in speeches during official anniversaries. This reality is more mundane, full of simplifications and stereotypes that often originate from negative experiences of mutual relations.

Memory of Holocaust is a separate and much more difficult issue which is still a challenge for generations of Poles. It is a question about what exactly Poles remember from the occupation reality starting from first repressions of Jews and segregation in ghettos through deportations to extermination camps and executions, finishing at return of survivors. These events were accompanied by calling for help of those sentenced to death and a wide range of reactions – starting with support of hiding Jews and finishing with giving them away and stealing their belongings. Even more difficult to recreate are reactions to annihilation, assessment of acceptance and consent as well as objection or indifference. These elements of memory seem to be least examined and their understanding is the key for reconstructions of the overall image of Polish memory about Polish Jews.

Another important question is: to what extent such image penetrates the younger generation through family conversations and memories. The answer is not possible without conducting thorough research in which the collective memory will take into account the element of memory of Jewish neighbours. Research which will analyse the distribution of family memory. Such research should be the challenge for present

sociologists, especially now, when the memory is disappearing together with its carriers.

Obviously, memory about II world war will be, with the flow of time, strongly influenced by the discourse of historians present in academic environments. Historians, who can be considered as par excellence memory guards, are a very specific group whose influence on the present discourse of collective memory is not unlimited. Historians have conducted important research on holocaust for years, the bibliography is rich. Apart from historians, sociologists, culture experts and anthropologists also have been examining the attitudes of witnesses of annihilation towards its victims and towards social memory. In recent years, historic research resulted in many important works which verify the images about Polish-Jewish relations from the past. However, even the most revealing work gets across to the collective consciousness of the society slowly (sometimes never) and very often it is mainly aimed at specialists. Creators of collective memory and public institutions can, but do not have to, make use of it. They do it selectively to meet their needs. The content of official speeches made during official celebrations is very political and very often does not express the historical truth.

Poland is an example which shows exceptions, proved by famous works of Gross which started a national debate on national myths which exist in the historical consciousness and memory of few generations of Poles. The fact that these works entered Polish discourse from the outside and the author worked on them abroad, is very characteristic. In spite of the fact, that communists gave back the political power in 1989 which led to abolishment of censorship and allowed to raise issues so far reserved for political decision mak-

ers, many issues were still not raised. During the next two decades after 1989 a huge transformation took place in Polish memory. The milestones were huge debates. They were held in the intellectual circles and they penetrated other social categories and influenced the transformation of collective memory of many Poles. It is a long-lasting process whose scenarios are not defined. Its examining and monitoring is a challenge for science and researchers of contemporary society.

On the other hand, elements of Jewish memory in Polish cultural memory refer to some events from the history that are embodied clearly by the most important anniversaries celebrated in Poland. There are two of them connected with Shoah that dominate, namely the one of the liberation of Auschwitz and of the outbreak of the uprising in Warsaw Ghetto. These celebrations increase the significance of suffering and heroism of those who died. Then, the wider context of annihilation, for example the indifference of the witnesses and passivity of those who could have prevented it, is mentioned less often. The mental transformation of the witnesses and victims, which was used as a crime machine, is also not mentioned. Cultural memory built on myths reduces the past to the elements which show pain, but also help. It might be an essential tribute to remember only the most important things. We are not able to remember everything, so selection is necessary.

### III. WHICH CULTURAL MEMORY?

What are the transformations of the collective memory that are taking place while the last witnesses and war generation are passing away? Because communicative memory encompasses experiences of the

recent past of the last three generations, for Poland it means that the memories go back to the beginning of independence in 1918 or the 30's – so the years of war and occupation. Even those years become less and less accessible as generation memory. That was when the Jewish life was vibrant in almost every Polish town and when anti-Semitism and social worries in Europe were increasing. If generation memory is a typical type of communicative memory, it means that it exists in the last years of independence and the war period and it will go away. Because of the lack of research and reports, it might disappear completely and its remains will exist in the distribution to the younger generation. New generation means, however, new memory about the reality without Jews. What will remain is the official message in school curriculums or a message of official instructions such as museums located in the places of Holocaust or research institutions focused on particular topics. Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which was founded in 2013, or the Oskar Schindler's Factory museum which has been opened since 2010 in Krakow, are the examples. Their role in the discourse about the memory of Holocaust will definitely increase.

As it was mentioned above, available research results show a discrepancy between things remembered by the witnesses and things preserved in the official message. On one hand the distribution is unofficial, it often includes negative memories about mutual economic relations. Referring to the witnesses of extermination (Shoah for example) shows passivity and often acceptance of the extermination. It cannot be reconciled with the memory which is officially cultivated, which is dominated by the images of care of Jewish neighbours. There even more differences, for instance,

the myth of a country which has always been friendly to Jews or the belief of many Poles about Jewish collaboration with the enemies of Poland.

According to Assmann, a group which recalls the history and figures of memory ensures its identity. It means that we cannot expect a situation that a big area is reserved for other groups, and even if it is, its management cannot be accidental. Even Halbwachs noticed that social groups remove from their memory information that causes lack of its coherence (Halbwachs 1969). So it is understandable that the resonance of celebrations of annihilation of Jewish society in Jedwabne which gathered the attention of the whole country when the official monument was unveiled, is low.

The phenomenon described is accompanied by constant controversies and conflicts which might be solved only when the memory of Shoah will unite with universal memory. So far, however, participants of debates a political memory creators will meet still present questions: Which elements of communicative memory should become part of cultural memory? How to select them without destroying mutual relations and

national myths, base of the collective memory? And finally: What should be distributed to the next generations and what should be forgotten – and what would be the consequences of such a choice.

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