

Zuzanna Dziuban

Framing Absence – Reframing Memory: Spatialities of Holocaust and World War II Memory in Contemporary Poland¹

Zuzanna Dziuban: Forschungsgruppe Geschichte und Gedächtnis, Universität Konstanz, Bischofsvilla Otto-Adam-Str. 5, 78467 Konstanz, Germany, Zuzanna.Dziuban@uni-konstanz.de

I Introduction. The Politics of Framing

In spite of what the title of this article suggests, I shall not concentrate exclusively on the memorials created on the sites of former National Socialist extermination and concentration camps in Poland. This does not mean, however, that I shall put aside the problem of spatialities of traumatic memory in Poland and of memorial architecture designed as Holocaust commemoration. I should rather like to explore and analyse memory work undertaken on the sites of former National Socialist camps in the broader context of Polish politics of memory as exercised with respect to different cultural trauma, or rather, historical and cultural traumas. I believe that focusing on historical events other than the Holocaust but nonetheless central for Polish national identity building and on the character of public memory shaped by monuments that commemorate those events can be very productive when interpreting Holocaust memorials. Cross-referencing and juxtaposing various sets of collective memories (and places), even though they almost never meet to create “sites of multidirectional exchange” – as Michael Rothberg would say² – can nonetheless open the space for some kind of illuminating and perhaps critical encounter. Since I am concerned here with the politics of framing and reframing, “looking awry” or just suddenly changing a frame seems to be the best way to do it. In order to justify

¹ This text was presented in the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft research group on “Geschichte und Gedächtnis” led by Aleida Assmann at the University of Konstanz.

² Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 24.

this decision, I shall now list several seemingly unrelated reasons or considerations that dictated this shift of attention.

Firstly, my participation in the networking meeting with organisations active in the field of Memory and Remembrance, organised by the European Commission and Fundamental Rights Agency in Copenhagen in late April 2012³, provoked me to rethink my position with respect to the problem of transnational or rather European memory. An effort to shape European memory and find the “defining moments in modern European history”, which – for obvious reasons – was crucial for the organisers of the conference, was confronted with critical voices pointing out the need to call the very existence of unifying and defined European memory into question. The issue loomed large at the conference. The objections – voiced, among others, by Harald Wydra and James Mark – to the unproblematic and naive operationalisation of the category of the European, also when it comes to Holocaust remembrance, were based mainly on their postulate to seriously integrate Eastern European memory into European memory politics. The need to again pose the question of what can unite rather than divide national communities and provide a point of reference for the common constructions of memory, so urgent in the process of unifying Europe, did not mean that the Europeanisation of the Holocaust – which, according to Dan Diner⁴, requires the understanding of the Holocaust as a foundational event for common European memory – should be disputed. Rather, the acceptance of the Shoah as the common and definitely transnational point of reference, crucial for the constructions of a European community of memory, should be supplemented by recognition of other histories, that is, Eastern European traumas, which could also be understood in terms of the “defining moments in modern European history”.

Interestingly, the need to rewrite European memory, or rather to destabilise and problematise it, and thus give voice to the multivocality and multiperspectivity of the communities of memory that shape the European Union, was strictly connected with Wydra’s and Mark’s reflection on Polish national memory politics after 1989. The importance of various histories of oppression for Poles and their national identity, which constitute what I should like to call here – borrowing Jacques Derrida’s category – “Polish hauntology”⁵, such as the gulag experience,

³ 2nd Networking meeting with organisations active in the field of Memory and Remembrance, “Remembering for the Future”, 26 & 27 April 2012, Copenhagen, Denmark.

⁴ Dan Diner, *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism, and the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning & the New International* (New York : Routledge, 1994).

mass deportations to the Soviet Union, Katyń, post-war Communist crimes, and more than forty years of grappling with a totalitarian regime, was stressed. The need to reintegrate those histories into the broader European context was emphasised. Yet both scholars' interpretations of what Eastern Europe remembers as its defining moments, obviously constructed from an outsider's perspective and aimed at articulating Eastern European problems in Western European categories, left the questions of "how?" and "why?" rather unattended. In the country where memories (especially after 1989) almost never unite and almost always divide, where political struggles are always strictly bound up with struggles over memory, the answer to the questions of "how?" and "why?" is, however, of primary importance. Collective and public memory in Poland is an extremely tangled and constantly contested terrain. Hence, only by raising queries firstly about its changing social and cultural functions and secondly concerning the political dynamics of "defining" moments in both Polish and European history can one grasp why "Polish national memory" (even as a purely theoretical and inevitably politicised concept) cannot be easily incorporated into the framework of also highly problematic European memory.

That is why I concentrate in the following more on the specificity of the politics of memory in Poland and elucidate, on the one hand, why and to what extent Polish Holocaust remembrance is shaped and affected by the inevitable tensions between the larger European framework together with European demands (as postulated by European Commission officials and willingly internalised by Poles) and national sentiments that sometimes block and problematise this internalisation. On the other hand, I look at how Holocaust memory is and can be entangled in a rather difficult process of reworking other "Polish" historical traumas, from which it seems to be radically separated. This kind of double contextualisation enables one, in my opinion, both to bring the multiperspectivity and locality of European Holocaust memory to the fore and to see Polish and "European" memory as inevitably "complex and plural", rather than as potentially unified and closed. Moreover, this kind of approach allows me to reflect on the consequences and usefulness of oscillation between various frames or politics of framing (transnational, European, national) for the process of working through the past, including the Holocaust as a "defining moment in European history". Only by locating the problem of memory work in the broader context of national identity building and identity politics, not only after World War II, and right after 1989, but also of contemporary memory clashes in Poland, can we understand better how policies of identity have been affecting commemorative efforts in former National Socialist camps, with consequences that seem to be especially problematic and controversial in the case of Poland.

II Katyń – Smoleńsk

Secondly, referring to the events that took place in Poland in April 2012, and which have dominated public debate in a way that I find extremely interesting and questionable, if not dangerous, was very hard to resist. The verdict of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg on Katyń, delivered on 16 April 2012, which was controversial and unsatisfying for many Poles, since the Katyń massacre was designated as a war crime and not as genocide (the result being that there will be no legal consequences for the Russian government), was definitely one of them. Therefore, from the perspective of many Polish politicians and historians, the crime committed in the forest near Katyń in April 1940 – the killing of 4,421 Polish reserve officers, police officers, and representatives of the intelligentsia with a bullet in the head (accompanied by the killing of more than 17,000 other Poles in Russian forests surrounding Charkow and Miednoje in April of the same year) – is still neither punished, nor properly commemorated (at least in European public discourse). Even though trauma discourse was employed by the Strasburg judges – reference was made to the double traumatisa-tion of the families of the victims who suffered both due to the loss and the lack of access to information about their relatives' fate, for more than fifty years, and thus were themselves victims of “inhuman treatment” – Katyń is still a solely Polish tragedy.

Another event is the second anniversary of the Smoleńsk tragedy. This took place on 10 April 2010, when a plane with the President of the Republic of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, his wife, and 94 other people (politicians, ministers, members of the Polish parliament, generals, family members, and activists engaged in the commemoration of Katyń) – all of whom were on their way to Katyń in order to participate in the commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the Katyń crime – crashed at Smolensk Airport. Two years after the catastrophe, one glance at the character of the commemoration of the anniversary and at the debate surrounding both the event itself and the politics of its commemoration is enough to pronounce with certainty that the process of coming to terms with it is definitely not over and will not be over for a very long time. The event, which at first (right after the catastrophe) unified Poles in an explosion of collective mourning⁶, nowadays functions rather as a wound that does not want to heal, provoking memories and interpretations that radically divide Poles – both politicians and ordinary men. Sometimes even the metaphor of “two Polands” or of the Polish cold war is employed to describe that division.

⁶ For critical analysis of this phenomenon see: Sławomir Sierakowski, Agata Szczesiak (eds.), *Żałoba* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2010).

Dramatically opposed interpretations of the Smoleńsk catastrophe are promoted: one sees the tragedy as an accident caused by bad weather conditions and mistakes made by the plane crew (which was presumably pressed to land in Smolensk even though warnings about the bad weather conditions made a decision to choose another airport more reasonable); another views it as a calculated and carefully planned attempt on the life of the Polish president, which is sometimes compared to the terrorist attack on The World Trade Centre⁷. According to a survey carried out this year, 18% of Poles believe that Russians are responsible for the death of the 96 Poles traveling to Katyń. The catastrophe is also perceived as a heroic deed and symbol of Polish destiny – a dramatic and uncanny encounter on the site of ongoing Polish tragedy, or simply as a repetition of the tragic fate of the victims of Stalinist crimes committed in the forest near Katyń.

The symbolic and very real battles over Smoleńsk were represented not only in political disputes and public debates led by historians and intellectuals, but also by sometimes very brutal struggles over public space. The burial of Lech Kaczyński and his wife in the Wawel cathedral in Krakow “alongside the great Jagiellon kings”, aimed at enhancing the “heroic interpretation”⁸ of their death, arouses a great deal of controversy until today. Another struggle is the long-lasting battle carried on by the “defenders of the Cross” and “opponents of the Cross”, the cross being the symbol of solidarity and support for the dead president, Lech Kaczyński, erected in front of the President’s Palace in Warsaw 5 days after the catastrophe and remaining there – guarded 24 hours a day – for more than five months. (After all, “[c]onflicts of memory converge with contests over territory”⁹ – as Michael Rothberg claims.) This year, apart from the religious dimension, new threads and arguments were added and operationalised in the battle over Smoleńsk. During the celebrations of the second anniversary of the tragedy, the rhetoric of truth-searching and high treason dominated. Supporters of Jarosław Kaczyński, taking part in the celebrations, were equipped with banners bearing the slogan “We demand the truth about Smoleńsk”, as well as depicting the present president, Bronisław Komorowski, and the prime-minister, Donald Tusk, and calling them traitors. The rhetoric of truth was intensified by direct reference to Katyń and to the “ethical” dimension of the remembrance of Smoleńsk – good and evil being not synonyms of universal moral positions, but standpoints taken by representatives of political parties who

⁷ Jarosław Kaczyński, See: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 10.04.2012.

⁸ Andrzej Nowak, *From Memory clashes to a general battle*, *East European Studies* no.6, (2011): 3.

⁹ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, p. 310.

do or do not care about finding out the “truth” about the catastrophe. To quote Jarosław Kaczyński, commenting on the course of the commemorative ceremonies in Warsaw, on 10 April this year:

At Krakowskie Przedmieście good defeated evil. Good, which is brought by memory and the truth, defeated the evil of forgetfulness and concealment. Poles were together again and have shown that they are willing to revere the memory of the victims of the Smoleńsk catastrophe. They have proven that time does not erase memory and does not make the question of what really happened at the airport in Siewiernyj invalid. Poles have shown the present government how to pay tribute to those who served their country. However, on 10 April the Polish State was quiet. It remained silent. Yet, this silence was not a sign of contemplation, prayer, or memory. It was a silence that shouted: “Nothing has happened!”, “There is not a problem!”. The anniversary celebrated silently by the Polish government had only one aim: to silence and erase memory, and to block the quest for the truth.”¹⁰

Thus, Smoleńsk, as this quote clearly shows, is being played on not only as emotional, but also as ideological and political capital – as a tool in the political struggle between the opposition party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice Party), led by Jarosław Kaczyński, suffering from a personal loss (after all, the dead president was his twin brother), and the government party *Platforma Obywatelska* (The Civic Platform) represented by Komorowski and Tusk. This new highly politicised way of framing Smoleńsk is clearly constructed due to the reference to the rhetoric associated closely with the communist regime and its ideological crimes. This consists of the silencing and the hiding of the truth, which certainly occurred with respect to the Katyń massacre, which for almost fifty years was attributed to the Germans. Yet the Smoleńsk discourse of truth cannot be interpreted as political “repression of the repressions”¹¹ – to use Alexander Etkind’s phrase – that was so liberating after 1989. The juxtaposition of Smoleńsk and Katyń that indeed two years ago led to the long-awaited broad and international public interest in the massacre committed in 1940, to the opening of Russian archives, and to the world-wide projections of Andrzej Wajda’s movie about Katyń (almost unnoticed at the time of its launching in 2007) now seems to be mostly enhancing the traumatising potential of the Smoleńsk catastrophe, the consequences of which have haunted the Polish political debate in an increasingly problematic way.

¹⁰ Gazeta Wyborcza, 11.04.2012.

¹¹ Aleksander Etkind, “Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction,” *Slavic Review*, 68, 3 (2009): 631–658, 635.

III Competing Commemorations

Thirdly, and probably most importantly, the results of the international competition for the concept of a monument commemorating the victims of the Smoleńsk air crash were announced on 30 March this year. The competition was organised by the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. The members of an international jury chose the winning project from 96 submitted competition works. Surprisingly, the “Regulations of the International Competition” did not impose any particular top-down content requirements on artists taking part in the competition. The only limitations concerned the form and material of the monument: the maximum area of 400 m² and the maximum height of 5 m. “The artists are granted the freedom of artistic expression”¹² – states the document. The jury granted three prizes (the winning design being guaranteed realisation) and four equivalent distinctions. All of the competition entries that won awards were submitted by Polish architects or sculptors.

The projects were very diverse and employed very different symbolic, representational, and religious imagery: from the commemoration of every individual victim of the catastrophe and the locating of his or her death in the broader frame of a cross consisting of 96 uneven and damaged stones, the fractures symbolising the devastation caused by the plane crash (the third prize), to more abstract projects – like the one that was awarded the second prize, in which the idea of a victim as both a martyr and a witness (as the authors claim) plays a crucial part. In the latter project the symbolic temple created on the site “on which the sacrifice on that 10 April was made”¹³ is to be framed by four rows of trees and house an altar, interestingly, marked by a sign of a Russian, that is Orthodox, Cross.

The winning design was proposed by the sculptor Andrzej Sołyga, the architect Dariusz Śmiechowski, and the graphic designer Dariusz Komorek. The project – according to the justification of the verdict – was rewarded

For the full respect for the authenticity of the place. For the protection of the zone assigned for the victims. For the solemnity of the time-space arrangement which is a backdrop for the diverse emotions of the visitors. For the dramaturgy of the road that all the

¹² Regulations of the international competition for the concept of monument commemorating the victims of the air crash that took place near Smolensk on the 10th of April 2010, Centrum Rzeźby Polskiej in Orońsko, the 4th of August 2011. <http://sculpture.art.pl/index.php?m=19&p=69>. Viewed on 23.04.2012.

¹³ Opis Projektu (Project Description) 030591. <http://sculpture.art.pl/index.php?m=19&p=69>. Viewed on 24.04.2012.

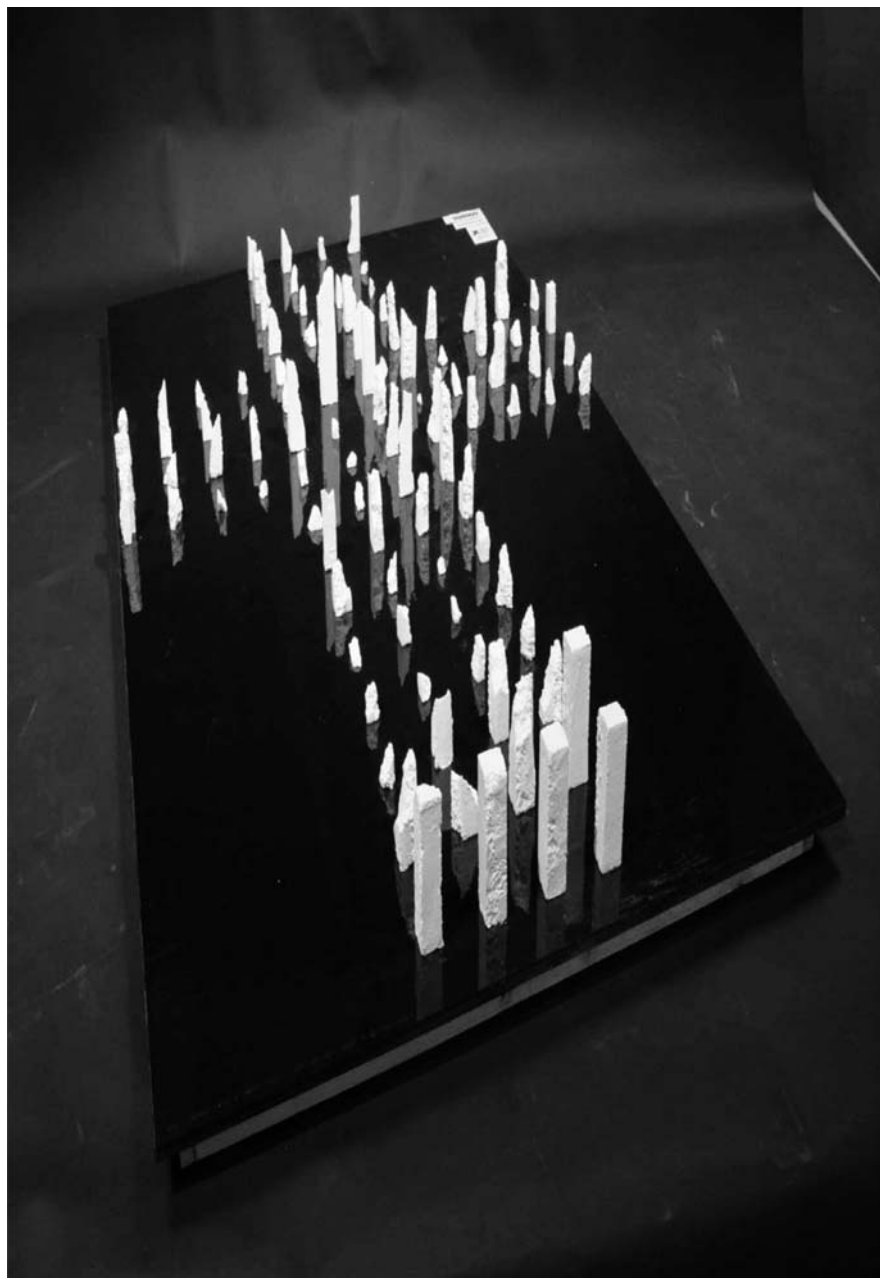


Fig. 1: Monument commemorating the victims of the Smoleńsk air crash. Project by Tomasz Tomaszewski. Third Prize. Courtesy of The Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko.



Fig. 2: Monument commemorating the victims of the Smoleńsk air crash. Project by Jeremi Królikowski, Jan Mazur, Krzysztof Ozimek, Mateusz Ozimek, Ewa Trafna, and Włodzimierz Mikusiński. Second Prize. Courtesy of The Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko.

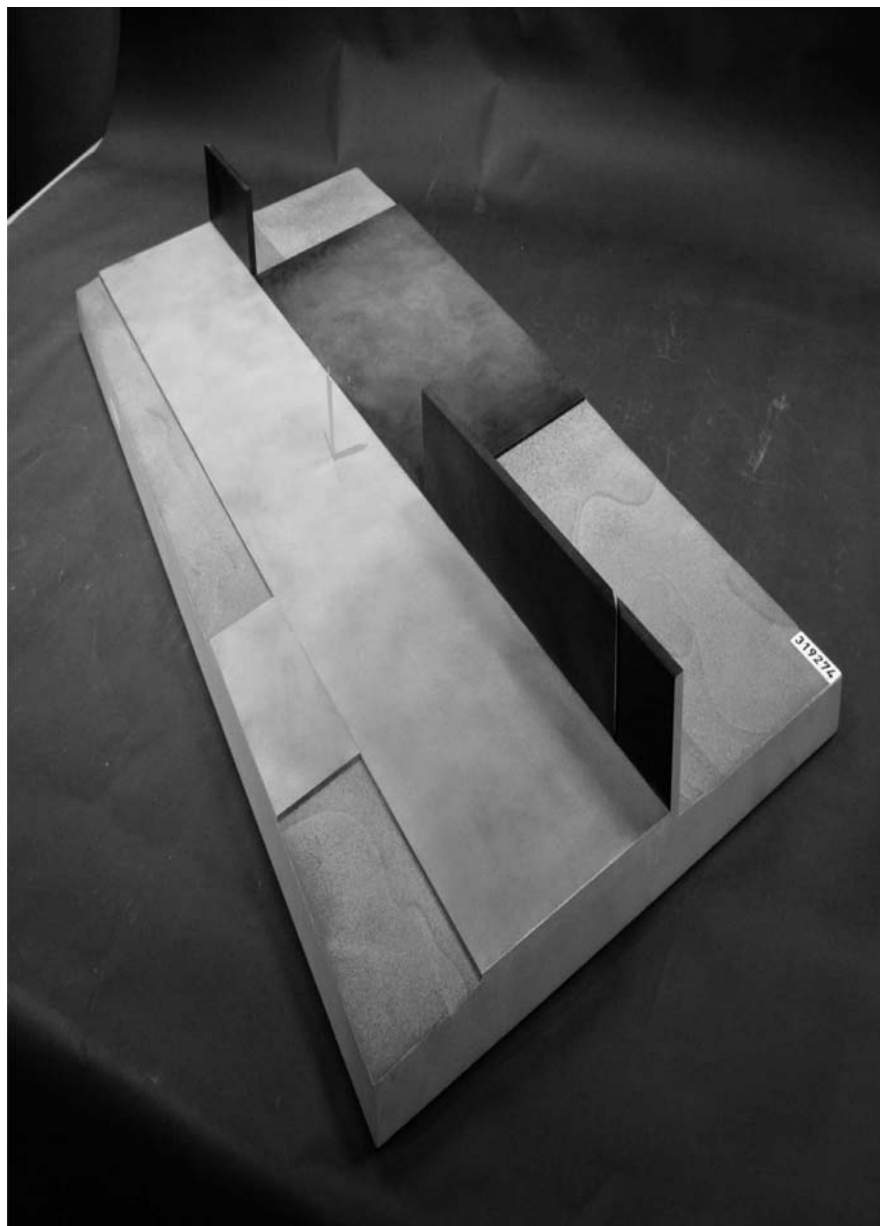


Fig. 3: Monument commemorating the victims of the Smoleńsk air crash. Winning project by Andrzej Sołyga, Dariusz Śmiechowski, and Dariusz Komorek. Courtesy of The Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko.

living have to take, reflecting the last phase of the catastrophe and then opening space onto the metaphysics of death.¹⁴

The project consists of two symbolic roads and a black, fractured wall aimed at separating the visitors' area and the piece of land still covered with the victims' remains. The design also aims at preserving within its scope the cross and stone erected on the site of the accident just after it happened. Yet, its most interesting element, surprisingly not intended to transform the landscape of the Smoleńsk monument, seems to be the annex added to the project, which describes the "sculptural installation" to be built on the memorial site in Katyń.

Even though that element of the project was not – as the jury stated – taken into consideration by its members, since the proposition to rebuild the memorial in Katyń went "beyond the framework of the competition", its presence seems to be essential for the authors of the winning design. "We categorically state that it is not possible to link the plane crash with the Katyń crime, nevertheless we think that the commemoration of its context – the destination of the trip of the Polish delegation – is crucial for conveying the full scope of the drama"¹⁵ – says the description of the project. The sculptural installation was inspired directly by the events that took place (or actually did not take place) on the site of the Polish military cemetery and the memorial in Katyń on 10 April 2010, where a large part of the Polish delegation, preparing for a requiem Mass and already awaiting the rest of the Polish guests who were travelling in the presidential plane, was confronted with the news of their sudden death. 96 empty chairs – a very powerful image, which circulated in the Polish media right after the catastrophe, metonymically representing the outcome of the plane crash – symbolise the absence of the victims of the accident on the site of the commemoration of Katyń. Perhaps it is not possible to link the plane crash to the Katyń crime – as the authors of the project state – but it is apparently possible to go the other way round. Katyń is not commemorated in Smoleńsk, but Smoleńsk is to be commemorated in Katyń.

Thus, the planned post-Smoleńsk intervention on the Katyń memorial site – the vast terrain in the middle of the forest, consisting of six mass graves, each marked by a cast-iron cross, and a territory covered with real, but emptied graves that were discovered during World War II – is intentionally harmonised with the existing memorial. A huge sculptural installation of 96 bronze chairs is to be placed within the territory of the cemetery, right after the first row of the

¹⁴ The justification of the jury verdict, 02.04.2012. <http://sculpture.art.pl/index.php?m=19&p=69>. Viewed on 24.04.2012.

¹⁵ Opis projektu (Project description) 319274. <http://sculpture.art.pl/index.php?m=19&p=69>. Viewed on 24.04.2012.

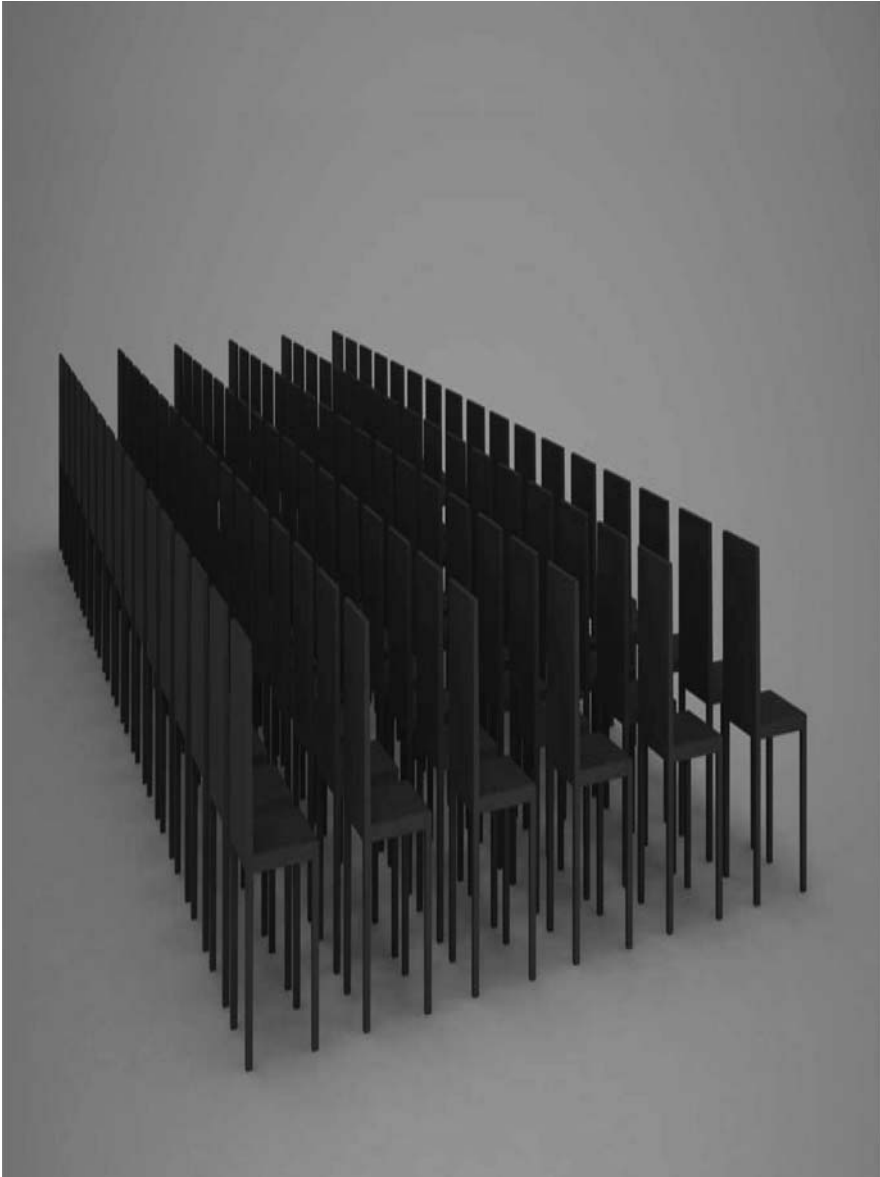


Fig. 4: Planned sculptural installation in Katyń. Courtesy of The Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko.¹⁶

¹⁶ Opis projektu (Project description) 319274. <http://sculpture.art.pl/index.php?m=19&p=69>. Viewed on 24.04.2012.



Fig. 5: Planned sculptural installation in Katyń. Courtesy of The Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko.¹⁷

¹⁷ Opis projektu (Project description) 319274. <http://sculpture.art.pl/index.php?m=19&p=69>. Viewed on 24.04.2012.

graves and just in front of the “sacred” space devoted to religious celebrations. Hence, the chairs are facing, or rather are pointed in, the direction of the so-called “communal epitaph” – a huge, cast-iron but intentionally fractured altar wall – behind which a massive, also cast-iron cross is placed. The altar stands in front of the wall and serves as the site of ceremonies and commemorations: speeches of government officials and representatives of the church are delivered from behind it. The location of the bronze sculpture (slightly darker than the rest of the cast-iron elements of the memorial complex) is therefore not marginal, but central: the chairs are situated exactly in the part of the cemetery where people gather to participate in collective, annual memorial celebrations, and where the “real” chairs awaiting the victims of the plane crash were placed.

I find the fact that this spatial – and not only symbolic – mutual reference of Katyń and Smoleńsk was made, and that the selected project was aimed at rebuilding the Katyń memorial, extremely important. While searching for the justification for the artists’ decision to establish a direct relation between the two sites, other than that very problematic one provided in the project description, I have discovered what made this kind of idea possible in the first place. The concept for the monument commemorating the victims of the massacre in Katyń, which was built in 2000 and now functions as a military cemetery and memorial site, was authored by the sculptor Andrzej Sołyga – the leader of the group responsible for the winning design in the Smoleńsk competition. Hence, the author of the Katyń project has the right to change it, rewrite and improve his own works. Yet, what seems to be even more interesting – something that I overlooked at first – is that the same artist, Andrzej Sołyga, in collaboration with Dariusz Komorek, also working in the Smoleńsk project, and two other Polish architects, Zdzisław Pidek and Marcin Roszczyk, was responsible for the creation of the concept of the most modern and most contemporary of Polish Holocaust memorials. I am referring to the only memorial landscape built after 1989: the one of the former NS extermination camp in Belżec, erected in 2004. A Polish *Liebeskind*, one could say.

IV Spatial Framing

It was exactly this coincidence – if it is a coincidence at all – that at first shocked me and then provoked me into trying to build some kind of a link or at least to juxtapose the three histories bound up with historical and cultural traumas crucial for Polish national identity, and the three places aimed at their architectural commemoration. Interpretative circulation between Belżec, Katyń,

and Smoleńsk is obvious with respect to the last two places, however, it does not seem so self-evident when it comes to Belzec.

The fact that the experience of World War II in Poland was very complex – differentiated between the Polish-German and Polish-Russian aspects of the war – only enhances the situation. Both aspects contributed naturally to the myth of Polish heroism and victimhood during the war.¹⁸ The latter, however, was able to influence the process of Polish national identity building only indirectly – on the level of private and family memory – since Soviet crimes were obviously silenced and concealed during the communist regime. As a consequence, the Katyń massacre, mass deportations to the Soviet Union, and the gulags during and right after the war, as well as their official and collective commemorations constitute a memorial universe rather marginalised on the European level, and completely separated from the commemorations and discussions surrounding Polish-German relations and the lately rediscovered Polish-Jewish aspect of the war. Thus, whereas National Socialist crimes (especially the Holocaust) and the problem of Polish-Jewish relations have been gaining significance in Polish public debates and memory work undertaken more or less collectively by Europe-orientated officials, scholars, artists, and influential left-wing activists and intellectuals, public commemoration of the Soviet crimes – such as the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of Poles in concentration and labour camps – is being monopolised almost exclusively by the historians from the Institute of National Memory, opposition parties, military officials, and, last but not least, the Catholic Church. The fact that Katyń and gulag memory is very often placed within a religious frame of reference, as a result of choices made by the victims and their families themselves (most of them also victimised under the communist regime), also leads to the marginalisation of those tragedies in the realm of public memory. (Although there are many plaques in Poland commemorating the survivors and victims of the gulags, every one of them is materially and symbolically linked with a cross. The first gulag museum will be built in Białystok in 2016).

Consequently, Europeanised and secularised Holocaust memory in Poland is almost never confronted with other Polish traumatic stories, and if it is, the confrontation resembles a competition between collective memories, a zero-sum struggle for recognition – such as those described by Michael Rothberg in *Multi-directional Memory* – rather than any kind of productive exchange. The unspo-

18 For a detailed account of this problem see: Annamaria Orla-Bukowska, “New Threads on an Old Loom: National Memory and Social Identity in Postwar and Post-Communist Poland”, in: R. Lebow, W. Kansteiner, C. Fogu (eds.), *The Politics of memory in Postwar Europe* (Durham, London : Duke University Press, 2006).

ken rivalry between two parallel, traumatising memorial universes that are supposed to collectively create Polish national memory does not allow their agents to exchange experiences and therefore to learn. What is more, that major, persistent, and rather artificial chasm blocks, in my opinion, the cultural process of working through the burden of both traumas.

Therefore, my cross-reference of Holocaust memory work with memorials reworking different foundational moments in Polish history is aimed neither at merely supplementing, nor at equating. I am rather willing to show that the two processes are inevitably interrelated – even if only on a level that is very rarely brought to the fore. I am well aware that this kind of a decision cannot be justified exclusively by the fact that all three memorials were designed by the same architect. That is why I shall try to put his explanations and descriptions of the memorials aside and concentrate exclusively on the history of the memory of the sites and memorial landscapes: spatial representations, spatial imagery, and the symbolical, ideological, and political dimension that the projects evoke.

One can conceive the spatial framing of Belżec, Katyń, and Smoleńsk most of all as an endeavour to locate them in something other than a merely political context. The symbolic framing of the mass graves – the absent remains of the dead – functions as a central element of all three analysed memorials. Thus, the sites are transformed into cemeteries. This kind of transformation, even though obvious in the case of Katyń, which functions as a war cemetery, is additionally reinforced by the fact that the sites of burial established after the war are symbolically separated and doubled by exposing the location of the mass graves in which the NKWD buried murdered Poles. The burial pits “marked as stains in the forest landscape, freed from any vegetation, are to display the stains that cannot be erased.”¹⁹ The absence of the dead is located in a strictly religious frame: the entrance gate to the cemetery is equipped with four signs symbolising four religions, the followers of which are buried in the Katyń forest. In the centre of the cemetery there is an altar and an altar wall. It is very clear that the site functions as a place of mourning and recalling the dead.

The transformation of the site of the Smoleńsk plane crash catastrophe into a symbolic graveyard is achieved thanks to the spatial division of the memorial site into two separate parts: the public one, accessible to visitors, and the “sacred”²⁰ one, closed, inaccessible, and still covered with the remains of the victims of the catastrophe.

¹⁹ Biuletyn Rady Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa „Przeszłość i Pamięć”, Nr 3 (16), lipiec-wrzesień 2000.

²⁰ Opis projektu (Project description) 319274. <http://sculpture.art.pl/index.php?m=19&p=69>. Viewed on 24.04.2012.

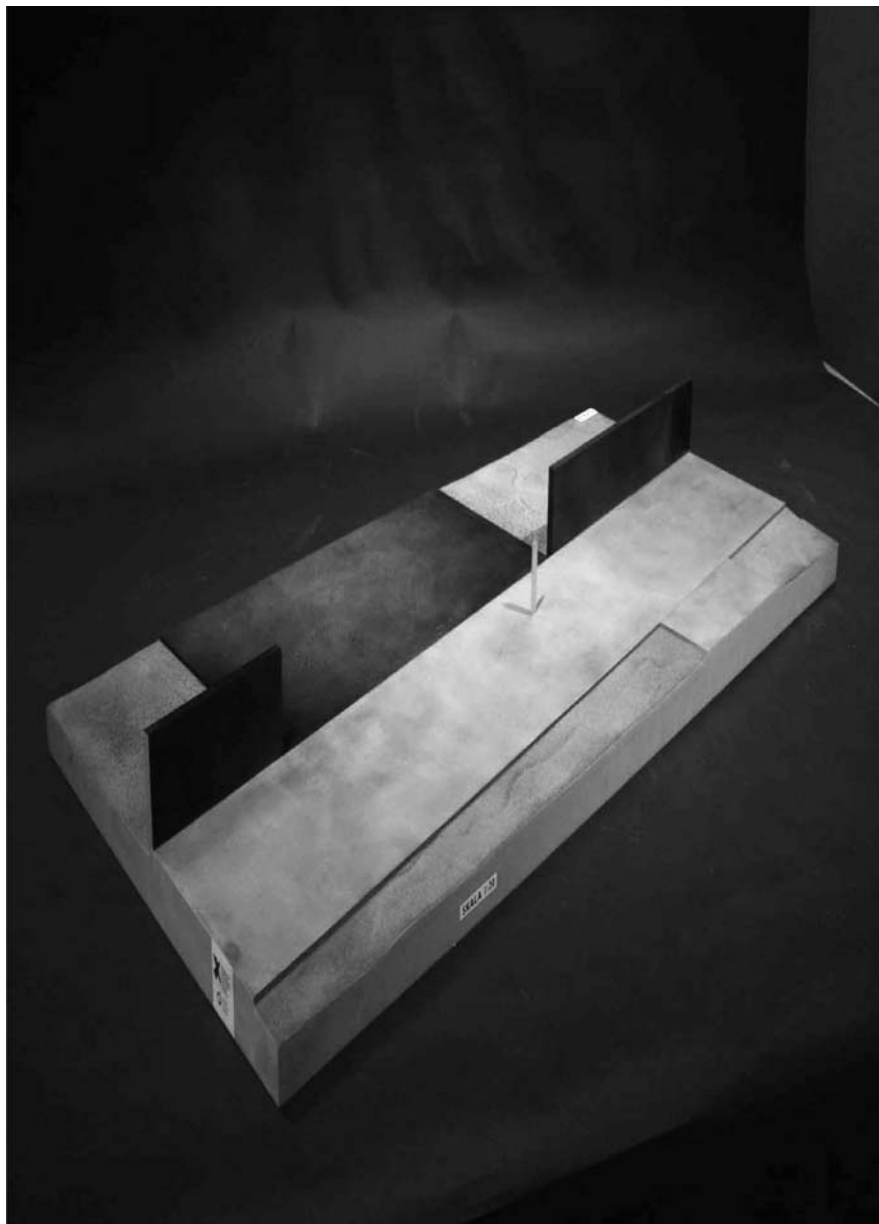


Fig. 6: Planned Smoleńsk Memorial. Courtesy of The Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko.

The public part of the memorial, constituted by two perpendicular roads (forming a cross), one of which is to mirror the direction of the flight of the plane, are separated from the sacred part by a black, funereal wall. The ruptures in its texture – though not wide enough to cross the wall – make it possible to look on the other side. The only part of the site where the sacred and the secular meet is where a broad rift in the wall – located on the site of the intersection of the two roads – gives access to a small square covered with a black relief. This site – intended as a place for contemplation and remembrance – is framed by the names of all 96 victims of the accident. Again, religious imagery and the sacred-secular opposition, as well as an effort to problematise the extent to which the identification of the visitors (at first symbolically repeating the road of the victims of the catastrophe) with the death can be achieved, are crucial for the architectural elaboration of the memorial site.

The strategy of commemoration applied in Belżec takes on and elaborates the problem of representing the graveyard in a slightly different manner. The main objective of the sculptors responsible for the project was not only to protect the 33 mass graves discovered by archeologists, but also to symbolically represent the camp itself.

The beautiful landscape is separated from its surroundings by a concrete wall. After passing through the entrance gate, visitors find themselves on a symbolic ramp, framed by the museum building (train) on one side, and by a pile of rails on the other. The function of the pile of rails is to represent a funeral pyre on which the corpses of gassed victims were burnt. In front of the ramp there is a cemetery: a raising terrain covered with slag and fenced with wire which therefore – like fragments of the Katyń and Smoleńsk memorial sites – cannot be trespassed upon. Fragments of the fenced land, covered with darkened slag and untouched – according to Jewish tradition – mark the mass graves. The slit or tunnel leading through the graveyard – the only part of the cemetery accessible to the visitors – is also the only part of the camp free of human remains, and is probably also the death road of the camp.

The tunnel leads visitors to the Ohel, the walls of which are covered with names (but not surnames) of the victims, and the inscription, which stems from the book of Job and provides an interpretative frame for the aesthetic means used for the creation of the terrain of the cemetery: “Earth do not cover my blood – let there be no resting place for my outcry”. The experience of crossing the tunnel between the graves, very suggestive, but affective rather than haptic, reminds one of the experience of walking through Eisenman’s Holocaust Memorial. Yet, the interplay between the experience of trauma of the victims who were forced to cross the road, and the experience of the visitor, inaugurated by the architectural form of the Belżec memorial, has a denouement that is lacking



Fig. 7: Bełżec Memorial. Photo: Piotr Kolasiński.



Fig. 8: Betžec Memorial. Photo: Piotr Kolański.



Fig. 9: Belzec Memorial. Photo: Zuzanna Dziuban.



Fig. 10: Belzec Memorial. Photo: Piotr Kolasiński.

in Eisenman's project. The experience of distance and closure restored thanks to the entrance into the Ohel very much resembles the one provided by the Smoleńsk square. Identification with the victims is blocked and memory (as mourning or as melancholy) is all that remains.

V Between Absence and Memory Work

Also obvious are the similarities between the history of memory of Belżec and Katyń seen as both *lieux de mémoire* and merely topographically conceived sites of memory. After World War II, both sites were almost absent in Polish memory discourse (or forgotten, as it is often claimed). When present or referred to, they were inevitably ensnared in a web of lies. The institutionalisation of official memory under the totalitarian regime, strictly connected with the so-called politics of “white stains” – realms and events being an object of intentional and state controlled cultural amnesia – led to the inevitable erasure of the Katyń and Holocaust memory (separated from the memory of Polish suffering during World War II) from the public realm. They existed primarily as private landscapes of traumatic memory. Thus, the disturbing absence (“absent presence”), which can be seen as metaphorical only to a certain extent, has to be understood as part of the history of the memory of both sites.

Katyń, for more than forty years nonexistent in Polish public history, became an object of open public debate only after the political transformation in Poland in 1989. In 1995, Soviet responsibility for the Katyń massacre was confirmed by “president Gorbachev in part, and then by president Yeltsin in full”²¹, making official commemoration of Katyń in the “authentic” site in Katyń forest (that is in Russia) possible. Poles were not only granted access to the site, but most importantly regained the right to openly criticise and accuse both Russians, who committed the crime and Polish officials who concealed the truth about it for such a long time. Katyń was thus immediately employed as a tool in the ideological and political struggle between the right-wing parties and the post-communist ones. Moreover, thanks to the fact that it symbolised crimes committed both on Polish citizens and on Polish memory it could (and it was most definitely used in this way) be placed “at the very heart of [the] Polish victimhood [and heroism]”²² myth of those who perished in the Katyń forest, as well as of those who suffered or died while fighting for its memory. The critical

²¹ Orla-Bukowska, “New Threads”, p. 205.

²² Nowak, “Memory clashes”, p.3.

and political potential of Katyń, as the essence of Russian and Polish crimes, as well as the mythological one, reinforcing the Polish myth of heroism and victimhood, is consequently being played out until this very day.

The rediscovery of Belżec after 1989 was governed by a very different logic, contributing actually to a problematisation of the above-mentioned myth. The site as a subject of historical research was transformed into a contested landscape: a prism through which one could not only rethink the efforts to decentralise, revise, or reinterpret the history of the memory of the camp, but also analyse the problem of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II – until then almost absent from Polish public discourse.²³ Thus, the discussion opened by the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross's controversial book on Jedwabne (*Neighbours*) in 2000²⁴, and on the post-war plunder of Treblinka and other sites of former extermination camps (*Golden Harvest*) in 2010²⁵, radically transformed the Polish imagery and cultural memory of death camps, and allowed one to question the firmly established conviction about Polish victimhood during World War II. Most importantly, the debate and the following extended research on the post-war history of the camp destabilised the victim-perpetrator dialectics that were foundational for popular Polish interpretations of the war. The problematisation of the question of the ownership of World War II trauma presented extermination camps in a totally new light: they became the synonym not only for the more or less generalised "Hitlerian terror", but also – at least to a certain extent – for "Polish guilt".

Paradoxically, the radically opposing political and ethical entanglements of the interpretations of, respectively, Katyń – reinforcement of the myth of heroism and victimisation – and Belżec – destabilisation of the myth and deconstruction of the deeply grounded victim-perpetrator dialectics – which should problematise each other and open space for a discussion aimed at working through the burden of both, are hardly visible at the Katyń and Belżec memorial sites. What is more, the cultural history of absence of those sites, which is central to their political and ideological meaning today, is not incorporated into either one of them. Yet, absence – as seen and framed from a variety of interpretative perspectives – plays a dominant rôle in the strategies of remembrance inscribed in Belżec and Katyń as landscapes of traumatic memory, as in Smoleńsk.

Firstly, its public idiomatisation in the memorials presented as sites of confrontation with death marks the division between the visitors and the victims all

²³ See: Robert Kuwałek, *Obóz Zagłady w Belżcu* (Lublin: Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, 2010).

²⁴ Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (New York, London: Penguin, 2002).

²⁵ Jan Tomasz Gross, Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Złote żniwa* (Warszawa: Znak, 2011).

too clearly. Yet the intentionally problematised identification, blocked by the fences, fractured walls, and inaccessible parts – strengthened only by the sacralisation (problematic, but almost inevitable in the Polish context) constantly at work at all three memorial sites – refers not only to the lack of access, but also to the surplus of meaning that is to be (or rather cannot be) experienced there. The “tension between the inconceivable experience”, represented by performative absence – to borrow Jay Winter’s term²⁶ – and the visitors’ inability to take control over it and interpret it as an “explainable historical phenomenon”²⁷ is certainly at work here. (The artists working on all three architectural projects thus introduce the spatial interplay of private and cultural trauma – an aesthetics which is crucial for the majority of contemporary Holocaust memorials.) Also, death is not justified by any kind of historical (political, ideological) cause or granted any particular “earthly” meaning. Apart from the opposition between the secular and the sacred, which travels rather freely between a variety of religious contexts, the memory of those who remain is not given any clear interpretative frame. The lack or absence of ready-to-hand patterns of memory work or of strong interpretative frames, which is crucial for all three minimalistic projects described above, is strengthened by the above-mentioned lack of reference to the public and political debates surrounding the events that took place in Belżec, Katyń, or Smoleńsk. Hence, apparently, it is not the content of traumatising memory but its structure that is being elaborated here.

Yet the decision to place 96 empty chairs, which mark the absence of the victims of Smoleńsk, in the memorial landscape of Katyń radically questions the neutrality of the pre-existing spatial design and problematises the effort of shifting the responsibility of filling these places with meaning onto the people who visit them and separates the experience of the sites from the context of their social and cultural afterlife. The fact that the context of the catastrophe is being commemorated elsewhere – the meaning of Smoleńsk is being reworked on the site of the Katyń tragedy – points to the irreducible interrelation and a process of reciprocal shaping of specific spaces, cultural, social, political, and ideological discourses. The sites and histories cannot be approached in isolation, the Katyń memorial site seems to say. They rather have to be treated as “travelling” and multidirectional, and thus as parts of broader symbolic and interpretative configurations, within the scope of which they are being constantly rewritten and reworked.

²⁶ Jay Winter, “Thinking about Silence”, in: E. Ben-Ze’ev (ed.), *A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²⁷ Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 143.

Copyright of Naharaim -- Journal of German -- Jewish Literature & Cultural History / Zeitschrift für Deutsch -- jüdische Literatur und Kulturgeschichte is the property of De Gruyter and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.