

Remembering What Should Be Forgotten: The Case of the Katyn Massacre

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A horse with wings, a man resurrecting from death, women looking into cards in order to see the future, ordinary people transforming into heroes. These are only a few of many cultural concepts that are to be found in society. Yet, this which might seem to be an innocent play of imagination is in fact highly dangerous in terms of human evolution. (Turner 109) The human tendency to combine elements, which in reality do not fit together and in order to avoid confusion should be kept separated, Turner calls “forbidden- fruit blending.” However, what is forbidden from an evolutionary perspective becomes highly stimulating for human creativity. Cultural concepts that contradict logical laws not only function extremely well in art and literature, but contribute to the increased ability in abstract thinking. Moreover, the construction of images that do not correspond with empirical experience participates in creating a specific bond between human beings and a sense of collective identity. Turner stresses the readiness with which other people respond to such cultural concepts, which allows exchange and incorporation of such ideas.

How does a cognitive theory that explains the phenomenon of human creativity relate to memory? In the social realm one of the functions of memory is to provide evidence that will allow common ground for history and facilitate the sharing of the past in order to create a sense of collectivity. On the other hand, memory introduces the problem of relativity and evidence. If past events lack documentation or testimonies of witnesses, it is as if they never occurred. On a

political level the construction of history plays an essential role, since it determines people's identity, and consequently their actions. The knowledge that it is easier to rule a nation that lacks a past is used throughout history. Studies in memory show that preserving cultural heritage and practices of past generations increases the chances of survival of certain groups or nations. (Assmann)

Consequently, memory becomes an instrument of control when political regimes introduce silence in regard to past events that are inconvenient or can threaten their authority. In this article, I will discuss the issue of silence that is enforced by authorities and meets with resistance. Drawing a simile on Turner's theory of forbidden-fruit blending, any type of prohibition becomes highly stimulating for human creativity. That which is forbidden in a public sphere starts being expressed through art and literature. Moreover, the cognitive construction of the human brain facilitates the remembering of a certain event when it is presented as an artefact rather than pure facts and figures.

I will study the case of the Katyn Massacre, a mass slaughter committed in 1943 on Polish officers and intellectuals by the Soviets and discovered by the Nazis during the German occupation. I will discuss how the politically imposed silence is broken in the realm of aesthetics and the influence such a situation has on memory. Assmann stresses the great significance that cultural memory, demonstrated through art, literature and rituals, has in the formation of collective identity. (129) It allows the development of the unity of a certain group. The intentions behind the Katyn Massacre were precisely to break the unity and deprive the nation of cultural memory. Paradoxically, the remembrance of this crime was strengthened by the imposed silence and became one of the strongest factors in building collective identity in post-war Poland.

Katyn Massacre

The Katyn Massacre is one of the historical events which support a theory discussed by Luisa Passerini pointing out that the "twentieth century has been for the most part a time of cancellation of memory." (241) Passerini states that this tendency is mostly related to the totalitarian regimes, which is the case with Katyn. During the Second World War, about 15,000 Polish officers, thinking they were to fight the Nazis, were moved to the eastern front. However, as it was agreed upon in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed between Germany and Russia in August 1939, Soviet forces had already invaded Poland. Therefore, the

soldiers became imprisoned by the Red Army and were held in camps. In the spring of 1940, the officers, together with a number of Polish intellectuals, were transported to the Katyn forest and then executed by a gun shot in the back. A US Congressional Select Committee described the Katyn massacre in 1952 as “one of the most barbarous international crimes in world history.” (Stachura 643) The mass slaughter aimed at the extermination of Polish intellectual elite in order to facilitate Soviet rule after the war.

The mass grave was discovered by Nazi soldiers in 1943 and used as an instrument of propaganda in order to bring mistrust between the Western Allies. However, the Russian officials denied the accusation and argued that it was a crime committed by Germans and then used as a provocation. Although the evidence was pointing at the Soviets, Great Britain refused to start an investigation in order to keep Russian support in fighting the Nazis. As George Stanford points out in his study of the Katyn massacre: “[A]fter 1943 the Western Allies sacrificed not only the objective truth about Katyn but also their Polish wartime ally, although whether they did so consciously or otherwise is highly controversial.” (96) At the Nuremberg war crime tribunals the issue of the Katyn massacre was not discussed. Despite various studies published since the end of the 1940s that proved the crime was committed by Soviets, this reading was officially denied until 1990. The case of the Katyn massacre became one of the greatest taboos of the communist regime in Poland. It was not a part of the history programme at schools and any public debate regarding the issue was forbidden. The publications referring to the crime were strictly censored and those who demanded the truth were subject to various repressions. Stanford stresses that the documents about what really happened in the Katyn forest were in fact awaiting since the opening of the Western archives in the early 1970s. (97) However, it was not until 1990, when the fall of communism and the changed ethical and human rights values after the end of the Cold War “threw new light on the handling of various aspects of the truth and the manipulation of public opinion regarding such wartime episodes as Katyn.” (Stanford 98)

In her study of silences, Passerini is mostly interested in the ones that were not imposed, “but were a self-decided attitude taken by a whole community or society.” (244) The Katyn massacre represents an essentially different type of silence. Since all the victims were dead, the only ones who could testify were the perpetrators. The crime was committed with premeditation and full awareness that it should not have occurred, and therefore all the evidence was supposed to be eliminated.

The silence was imposed not over those who remembered, because they were no longer alive, but over the facts and data that could facilitate reconstruction of the crime. In the case of the Katyn massacre, memory is transformed into a struggle to obtain knowledge of what should not be forgotten. Those who try to reconstruct the past become, in a sense, a memory extension for those who can no longer tell what happened.

Passerini stresses that in deciding between memory and oblivion it is most important to recognize that there is in fact a choice. (240) However, the automatism in remembering and forgetting, criticized by Passerini as a lack of awareness, is absent in the cases of imposed 'amnesia.' In case of the Katyn massacre, memory displayed a function other than just a preservation of past events. The imposed silence transformed remembering into a moral mission. The memory of the Katyn massacre, on one hand, took the form of paying a tribute to the dead. On the other hand, it became a specific revenge on their executioners. It was not even the crime but more so the imposed amnesia that had a major influence on many generations of Polish people, who were fighting for the truth of what really happened.

Breaking the Silence in the Realm of Aesthetics

Commonly, in most of the situations regarding imposed silence, the past of the nation lies in the hands of historians. Through the scholarly investigation of the past, historians reveal the mechanisms which were unknown to the population. However, for almost fifty years after the discovery of the mass graves in Katyn, any historical study regarding the massacre could only be done outside of Poland and was hardly known to the population. These political circumstances had crucial implications for the ways in which the Katyn massacre was dealt with in collective memory. Firstly, the situation enforced a more active attitude from individuals, who were confronted with responsibility for preserving the memory of the Katyn massacre which would otherwise be forgotten. Secondly, the role of historical studies was taken over by art and literature, which were the only instruments to break through the imposed silence and prevent oblivion.

The two dimensions on which the imposed silence was broken, namely through individual memories and artefacts, were in fact closely linked and strengthened by one another. The phenomenon of such 'underground' collective memory becomes visible in *Katyn w literaturze. Międzynarodowa antologia poezji, dramatu i prozy* [Katyn in Literature. International Anthology of Poetry, Drama and Prose] (1993), a collection of

works edited by Jerzy R. Krzyzanowski. The selection includes literary works of over a hundred authors. Among them are texts created by writers as well as personal pieces by the families of the Katyn massacre's victims. There are poems by distinguished authors, such as the Nobel Prize winner Czeslaw Milosz, and those written by the murdered officers found in the mass graves. It becomes not only a summary of the national tragedy, but also a representation of a collective effort to preserve the memory from oblivion.

Clearly, history disappears if never recorded. Literature and art perform a recording function when the past cannot be documented officially and can only be preserved in an aesthetic form. The realm of aesthetics also became crucial in constructing collective identity after the authorities imposed collective amnesia on the events of the Katyn massacre. As Assmann observes in his analysis of the relation between communicative and collective memory, groups "conceive their unity and peculiarity through a common image of their past." (131) However, imposed silence leads to an incoherent image of the past, in which the individual memories are in disagreement with the public version of history. The individuals lack a common ground with the others from their 'group,' or collective and are unable to match memories, since what they know cannot be communicated. The transition that allows memory to become history cannot take place here and consequently the identity of the group is dissolved. Literature and art become a missing link and allow reconstructing of the sense of collectivity.

Poetry and Memory

The role that poetry plays in remembering the past is quite specific, since choosing this form of literary memory gives a specific approach to the events it is dealing with. There is a significant amount of studies that show the significance of narrative in collective memory. Hayden White stresses the human tendency to narrate any past events in order to report the past, (5) while Ann Rigney stresses that narration of memory facilitates remembering and its longevity. (391) However, could it be that in case of certain events, let it be due to their traumatic character or lack of solid data, narrating the past seems somehow inappropriate?

The Katyn massacre and the official lie that followed upon it, poses an important question of how to talk about the past without a sense of profanation. For many people, especially the victims' families, the tragedy had nearly a religious dimension. Many literary texts take the form of a prayer, address God, Christ and Mother Mary. Moreover,

the lack of access to the evidence of what really occurred in the spring of 1943 in the Katyn forest made the precise reconstruction of the past very difficult. These two factors led to relatively few attempts to narrate the events in literary form. The Katyn massacre was already tainted with lies, and any type of literary work dealing with this event aimed at uncovering the truth rather than creating another fiction.

In remembering the Katyn massacre, the role of the narrative in the collective memory was taken over by poetry. Poems dealing with the tragedy were written by the families, by writers but also by those who simply felt moved by the tragedy. Poetry dealing with the Katyn massacre became a dimension where people communicated their emotions, shared the pain and paid tribute to the victims. It was also a form of protest against the imposed silence and an expression of solidarity, showing that the tragedy would not be forgotten. Most of the unofficial groups that were formed by the families of Katyn's victims would distribute amateur poetic volumes and would organise evenings on which these poems were read aloud. Clearly, all those attempts were illegal and carried a risk of heavy repercussions. However, the need for collective memory was stronger than the danger of possible consequences.

In his analysis of the relation between poetry and memory, James Applewhite observes that reading poetry involves not only the use of our stored knowledge, but also personal experiences and emotions. (24) He says that writing a poem is always "an act of memory." (24) However, it becomes something more than just this, as poetry creates a particular bridge between the present and the past. It captures a fragment of memory and allows experiencing it in the present over and over again, since articulation of memories in poetry transforms them from passive into active. The power of poetry is partially based on its ability to create a relation between our thoughts and feelings from the past and the present. As Applewhite writes: "[S]cenes, faces, bits of story that rise up spontaneously are thus more likely to have an emotive significance than those memories we might deliberately call up." (24)

In case of the Katyn massacre "scenes, faces, bits of story" were frequently everything that the people writing poems, and those who were reading them, had. They were desperately hanging on those fragments of memories and evidence in order to reconstruct the past and keep it from being forgotten. Poems were also in a more symbolic way such fragmented voices that they could rarely break through the curtain of imposed silence. Yet, every time they were heard, they

carried the pain of the past that maybe was still unclear and not fully understood, but was demanding truth and justice.

Applewhite stresses that reading poetry is a chance to reencounter our past. Although certain events have ended, many of them are still alive in us and keep influencing our present. Poetry allows us to confront those memories, especially the painful ones, as is the case with poems about the Katyn massacre. A poem is one of the most intimate literary forms, which leaves a lot of space for personal expression. It does not impose strict formal rules and does not, as is often expected from prose, have to clarify the event. Applewhite writes that his own experience as a writer have shown him that “the driving force behind memory is not merely the desire to call up earlier days, but the deeply felt need to reencounter unresolved issues and emotions – the need to understand, to come to terms with, past time.” (24)

I believe that the echo of such a need to confront the past in order to gain reconciliation can be heard in a poem by Zbigniew Herbert, one of Poland’s greatest poets, whose father was killed in the Katyn forest:

The Buttons

To the memory of Captain Edward Herbert

only the buttons implacable
survived the death witnesses of crime
come out of abyss to the surface
the only memorial on their grave
they are here to give testimony God will count
and will have mercy on them
but how the bodies are to resurrect
when they are clammy part of earth
a bird flitted a cloud passes
a leaf falls
and the silence in the highest
and smoke mist forest of Smolensk
only the buttons implacable
powerful voice of silenced choirs
only the buttons implacable
buttons of coats and uniforms
(my translation)

The buttons, to which the poem refers, are a symbol of a memory of the Katyn massacre, since it were one of very few pieces of evidence that were left on the as a testimony of the crime.

Remembering the Silence

The motif of the buttons comes back in the film *Katyn* (2007) by the Academy Award winning director, Andrzej Wajda. Two Polish officers captured by the Soviets discuss their possible faith when one of them says: “Buttons, the only thing that will be left after us. Buttons, buttons of soldiers’ uniforms.” Later in the movie, after the war, buttons are used as an evidence of the crime. The buttons become a symbol not only of the crime but also of the attempt to cover it, to erase the facts. The film revolves around these two subjects, it shows the slaughter of the two officers and the struggle of their families to uncover the truth and prevent it from oblivion. Wajda admitted that although he was hesitating which of these two subjects should become a main one in the movie, he could not separate the Katyn crime from the Katyn lie. In an interview for BBC the director said: “I realised these two elements had to come together because on the screen we have to see both the officers and the women. And they are being lied to.” (Hanrahan) Consequently, the film reflects not only the memory of the Katyn massacre, but also the memory of the imposed amnesia.

In her book *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Alison Landsberg analyses the phenomenon of prosthetic memory, which occurs when the products of mass culture make people experience and internalise past events that are not a part of their individual biographies. Landsberg argues that commodification of the past contributes to the collective experience of history. (143) Clearly, Wajda’s film does justice to the need of transforming prosthetic memories into ‘personal memories’ as it breaks the silence by portraying the crime that was not supposed to come to light. However, the problematic part of this project was that in fact for some of the viewers those memories were indeed already personal. The families of the victims, among who many for years did not know what had really happened, for the first time were confronted with the horror of the mass slaughter of their husbands, fathers, brothers.

In interviews Wajda frequently admitted that that was one of the greatest challenges in making the movie. He was aware of the fact that for many people this would be the first time that they would be directly confronted with the horror of the massacre. The images in the film are transformed into prosthetic memories. However, the director believes

that the truth, especially after decades of lies and imposed silence, must have a comforting effect, regardless of the harsh scenes it contains. As Wajda says in the BBC interview: “the best medicine, the best remedy for political and social problems is to show them and to speak truly about them. So, I hope that it’s going to soothe people because we have finally shown the truth.” (Hanrahan)

The motif of memory is present throughout the film. There is an officer who obsessively writes in his diary, day by day trying to record everything that is happening. A young captain scratches the name of the station they are being transported to in the train wagon with the cross of a rosary. The others leave personal belongings, letters, pieces of clothing, intuitively sensing this could eventually serve as a trace. The families of murdered officers follow the same pattern of behaviour, trying to preserve anything that could possibly serve as evidence in uncovering the truth. Such an obsession with memory is in a sense a mechanism of self-defense, a response to the danger of being forced into oblivion. The lie and imposed silence provoke a behaviour which in a sense could be called a survival strategy, survival of memory. However, once the conditions are changed and the memories are able to come to light, there is no longer a need for struggle. Wajda was frequently stressing that this is also a motivation behind the movie: to let the painful memories go rather than to open up new conflicts. The director says that he wanted “this film to be a farewell, an end to this subject.” (Hanrahan) This argument agrees with Passerini’s claim that something needs to be remembered in order to be forgotten. Breaking the imposed silence leads to the gradual diminishing of memory. Yet, this process does not mean erasing the past, but comes from a comforting awareness that the past is no longer a fight for truth and the memories are being protected. The end of imposed silence allows the present to start constructing a world of its own.

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SUMMARY

This article focuses on the issue of imposed silence and its influence on collective memory. It attempts to contribute to current discussions on how memory can be preserved through the use of cultural media. The case study of the Katyn massacre, a mass slaughter committed in 1943 on Polish officers and intellectuals by the Soviets, demonstrates that imposed silence can be defeated in the realm of aesthetics. The paper claims that the remembrance of this crime was in fact strengthened by the imposed silence and became one of the strongest factors in building collective identity in post-war Poland.

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