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‘Historical Memory’¹: Challenges of Contemporary Studies over Holocaust in Poland

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ABSTRACT

The article presents the problems connected with modern Holocaust research in Poland with regard to ‘historical memory’, bearing in mind that it has become an event, it has transformed the framework of culture, the way of thinking and social memory. What is the impact of collective memory on the problem of subjectivization, taking into account that the memory of the Holocaust is also interpreted from the point of view of the living generation? The difficulty that comes with the fact that memory includes both remembering and forgetting, it leads us to the question: How much do we remember? Despite its undeniable value, treating individual memory as the only true type of memory may be a cause of conflicts.

Keywords: collective memory, historical memory, Holocaust, Shoa, memory

1. INTRODUCTION

The Holocaust was intended not only to exterminate the Jewish people, but also to annihilate the memory about them, and so many researchers saw it as a moment of transformation of basic cultural frameworks, way of thinking, social identity and memory – the event changing the modern world and exerting an influence on every individual. The changes that took place after 1989 in Poland sparked a debate on the Holocaust, Polish-Jewish

¹ The term ‘historical memory’ in the article is treated as a synonym of ‘collective memory’, which was finally favoured by Barbara Szacka *Czas przeszły – mit – pamięć*

relations, Jewish history and martyrdom. This chapter of history was no longer ignored, and the subject of the Holocaust² generated more interest and gained an increasing attention in scientific research (Wróbel, 1997: 560).

2. RESULT

Aleida Assman distinguishes four types of memory, an individual memory characterized by a subjectivization of events; a memory of generations, which divides own views into the categories of 'the world' and 'events'; a collective and cultural memory. Each nation creates its own collective memory of events by referring to specific symbols, signs, rituals, customs, and places of memory or commemoration (A. Assman, 2008: 51-53). The regional memory is a characteristic feature of a given territorial community. It remains in close association both with the cultural and economic conditions, responding to the need to convey certain elements of the regional or local community. Its content constitutes not only elements of importance to the local community, but also to the supralocal community³.

When the present becomes the past, and the number of its witnesses begins to dwindle, as in the case of the Holocaust, memory – which sometimes becomes the only witness to past events – begins to assume more importance. Collective consciousness about events does not have to be uniform, and most often it is not (Coren 1999: 75-76). The memory presented by historians and in textbooks, verified and not subject to controversies and political debates, without greater impact on the evolving present, is often where a conflict between the individual and collective memory appears (Taumm, 2013: 464-466).

The increasing references to memory in research are conditioned by demographic and political factors. Witnesses, participants of World War II events are passing away, taking with them the memories that are sometimes the only source of information.

With the beginning of the mass persecution of Jews and the support sought by them, the moral problem shows in Polish homes. Faced with a choice that could result in the death of their relatives, not everyone was able to make the decision to help. The attitudes of Poles towards the Jewish people in that time can be summarized as negative, passive and positive. The last of the attitudes prevails in the descriptions depicting Poles, especially in the context of *the Righteous*. The Poles' reluctant attitude and crimes against Jews have for many years been ignored or marginalized.

By the end of the twentieth century, hardly anyone was aware of the inglorious demeanor of Poles during the Holocaust. It was not until the publication of Jan Błoński's essay *Poor Poles look at the ghetto* (Polish: *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto*) in *Tygodnik Powszechny*⁴, the publication of Jan Gross' *Neighbours* (Polish: *Sąsiedzi*), and the open

² The term 'Extermination'" (Zagłada) appearing capitalized in the article is treated as synonymous with the word 'Holocaust' and 'Shoah'

³ M. Prokopowicz, W. Wierzbieniec, Pamięć o Holokauście na podkarpaciu na początku XXI wieku na przykładzie obchodów rocznicowych, *Studia Podlaskie* vol. XXIV, 2016, p. 191.

⁴ Jan Błoński's essay for many people was a breakthrough in the Polish-Jewish dialogue. He believed that anti-Semitism could be eradicated if we analyzed our history with sincerity. In his reference to the crimes of Poles committed on the Jews, he writes that "Poetry, literature – or more generally, memory, collective consciousness – cannot forget about this bloody and hideous mark. It cannot behave as if it had never happened... You sometimes hear the opinions (especially from the young generation), who remain unimpressed

debate on the subject of Jedwabne that the discussion on this topic revived and became incorporated into the collective Polish memory. In the individual context, both the voice of the Holocaust survivors and the memories of its witnesses have not been obliterated or wiped out, and as R. Traba claims, the society had to mature to be able to accept with humility this kind of experiences.

Our memories are not only what we remember from first-hand experience, but they are complemented by the memory of others. Our belief in what we think is not strong enough to resist the memory that is cultivated by the group in which we function. Our memory is sometimes fallible, and the collective memory retains elements that allow us to reproduce a particular aspect of the past, so that, with its help, we are able to recall what seemed to be beyond our mind (Nora, 1989: 9).

Writing about particularly traumatic past events, which often include the experiences of the war and the Holocaust, is often difficult. It is connected with the fact that we do not want to remember everything and idealize our behaviour, which is associated with the problem of false message. Several groups that affect modifications of social memory can be distinguished, transforming or modifying the memory of societies, including:

- overlooking some unwelcome elements from the past,
- falsification of the past by saying something that has never happened,
- exaggerating and embellishing facts,
- binding and unbinding, based on a free manipulation of cause-and-effect relationships,
- blaming the enemy for your own failure,
- blaming the circumstances when other methods fail,
- structuring the context by simplifying combinations of conditions⁵

Historical events such as the Holocaust lie in a network of related events identified by cause-and-effect relationships. By their operation in collective memory, they are reduced to the simplest explanation, by selective featuring of certain events so that they positively affect the image of a given group (A. Assman, 1995: 128-129). The existence of this type of modification in the collective memory shows how important it is in society. Common memory is extremely important in the 'group', by being a factor which is integrating, cohesive, and which gives a feeling of the emotional bond and stability. Through values and common ideas, they become the core of a given social group. The heroes appearing in it are the embodiment of the most important values, becoming simply 'crystal' characters (Blonski, 1988: 358-359).

They cease to exist as people and they become symbols possessing only the best personality traits. This makes events constituting the collective memory become merely carriers of positive values. Negative messages appear only in relation to traitors, degenerates and enemies. Characters recognized as heroes are presented only in a positive, idealistic way, without taking into account inglorious life attitudes, while all negative opinions meet with a violent reaction of the social group. Similarly, when events are important for a given social group, both characters and events should remain spotless, consequently becoming one-dimensional. Selectivity by perceiving only positive values and patterns fosters

by this sign. We reject after all – they say – the principle of collective responsibility..." J. Błoński, Poor Poles look at the ghetto, Tygodnik Powszechny, Cracow 1987

⁵ J. Kraś, Zarządzanie w kulturze, Muzea Historyczne pomiędzy pamięcią zbiorową a polityką pamięci historycznej, 2013, p. 202.

romanticization of the past. The selectivity of memory makes the group decide which content is perpetuated in the collective memory, and which it is rejected. Such selectivity within the social group may lead to the ‘*unlearning*’ of certain elements of memory that are uncomfortable for the group. One of the ways of selectivity is silence, which is a common occurrence in small local groups, which do not discuss negative events. The silent approach most often affects events which relate to the occurrence of particularly dramatic events. Marcin Kula points out that an individual remembering certain events does not mean that the same events are present in collective memory, and even if they have been remembered, they are not talked about. He also notes that events arousing ambiguous judgments are remembered as much worse than the positive ones ⁶.

An important phenomenon that occurs in the connotation between the generational message and collective memory is the interference that occurs in it. It is affected by not conveying certain content indicating the lack of maintenance of moral canon, which would be condemned by the public. A common occurrence is an embellishment of appearance, even to a small extent, which serves only to enhance its image. The idealization of the past may stem from the fact that a witness of the events was a child, who will always feel more positive about childhood than a grown-up person, even if the message is in fact the truth. Another issue influencing interferences in intergenerational communication, which affects collective memory, is the discontinuance of group in a given area by relocation or migration, leading to the elimination of affiliation to a certain group or social phenomena.

The main reason for forgetting is the time elapsing between the past and the present, and the memory carriers passing away. It also means that along with the departure of witnesses, the approach to important issues is changing. Maurice Halbwachs states that certain events are not as important to us as they were to previous generations; however, it does not mean they are too distant, but that they do not function in terms of a system of concepts (Kucia 2016: 100-102). So forgetting is not only associated with disappearing, but also with changes in society’s memory framework. He also brings attention to the fact that the convention is changed only in terms of individual memory, which may be modified together with the needs of the community and its collective memory.

Common social memory is very important in the group because of its cohesive function. To fulfil its function, its content has to be unified within the entire group, and so what might contribute to divisions in a given social group is usually overlooked or marginalized. However, the part of memory that used to be banned, and was not associated with the framework of collective memory, may change depending on the needs of social balance (Confino 1997: 1400).

Memory, which constitutes an important element in the study of historical memory, should be the basis of collective memory, especially with regard to the experience of the Holocaust, more so since collective memory is not fixed, and is subject to the process of selection, interpretation and reinterpretation. The set of images includes the memories of individuals and the messages of other people, because only in this way can collective memory last longer and become an important element of social consciousness (Assmann, 2006: 16-17). Otherwise, we will be exposed to one of the greatest memory threats, which is forgetting.

By working in a given group, each person simultaneously defines his or her identity – this makes that collective memory is necessarily linked to connotations with individual memory, and vice versa. It becomes a selective process.

⁶ Michał Bilewicz, (NIE)PAMIĘĆ ZBIOROWA POLAKÓW, Teksty Drugie, 2004, p. 62-63

Writing down reports of experiences or word-of-mouth narrations is often used in Holocaust research, but it is worth noting that in deeper analyses they should constitute only a complementary part of research rather than its base. It is affected, among other things, by the time an account is written down – if it happens during an event or immediately after it, the report will have the greatest factual value. The biggest problem that in particular accompanies the memory of an individual is its nature of experiences, which is subjective, depending on the circumstances, the distortion of some facts of a personal or sometimes traumatic nature (Kasteiner, 2002: 187).

Recalling the events of the Holocaust is always dependent on the moment in which it takes place and on the message. We will receive one type of message from someone telling us about something for the first time, when the event is known to us and the message is merely a supplement to our research on experiences of the Holocaust, and another type of message from a family or social group because of its modifications. The events will be differently remembered by a child and an adult. A different perspective will be taken by a woman, and yet another by a man. More and more historians are analyzing the experiences of people who were very young during the Holocaust, and of those who were born later, also known as the second generation. Shoah is known to them only through the message of the closest families, but the trauma and experience of the Holocaust were passed onto them.

While listening to the accounts of Holocaust witnesses, the attention is drawn to the way in which they remembered the events and accompanying emotions that left their mark on their lives. This kind of experience influences our historical memory, becoming a tool for research and, most importantly, for understanding social behaviour that appeared in Polish-Jewish relations. The advantage of this kind of research is reaching the awareness of local societies and drawing from them the knowledge of some yet undocumented events. Utilizing the historical memory of an individual or a group allows accessing the social consciousness, where people's fate and experiences are intertwining. Historical memory is not an objectified form of message, it is based on narration characterized by individual experiences.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Today, more and more research is devoted to the Holocaust experience, attempting not to marginalize the negative attitudes of Polish society. More than 70 years after the end of the war, the Holocaust debate seems to continue. Thanks to the witnesses of these events, whose number is sadly dwindling, the memory of these events still exists. However, we should remember that historical memory is subjective, variable and influenced by many factors, so it should not be regarded as the sole source for research analysis.

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