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Creating trauma. Symmetries and hostile takeovers of (the Jewish) trauma

Creating trauma. Symmetries and hostile takeovers of (the Jewish) trauma. In this study I take a closer look at the strategies of post-memory thanks to which the Polish culture tries to produce your own trauma of the Holocaust. The “trauma of a Polish by-stander” turns out in this context to be post-trauma created in order to assimilate, take over or relativise the Jewish trauma. The posttraumatic strategies chosen by me with the Holocaust in the background obviously are not the only responses of the Polish culture to the Holocaust. The palimpsestial overwriting the trauma with other narratives, a kind of post-trauma that aims at taking over trauma, usually, however, escape the field of traumatological studies, and it is time to describe them.

Keywords: Polish by-stander, trauma, Shoah

Создание травмы. Симметрии и вражеские захваты (еврейской) травмы. В статье подробно рассматриваются стратегии, благодаря которым польская культура пытается создать собственную травму Холокоста. В этом контексте «травма польского зрителя» оказывается посттравмой, созданной для того, чтобы ассимилировать, перенять или релятивизировать еврейскую травму. Конечно, выбранные автором посттравматические стратегии, с Холокостом на заднем плане, являются не единственными ответами польской культуры на Холокост. Автор описывает своего рода постпамять, которая направлена на затенение травмы, как правило, выходит из области исследований травм.

Ключевые слова: постпамять, травма, посттравма, Холокост

At the turn of the 20th to 21st century, the Holocaust (and trauma associated with it) became a paradigmatic event for culture, ethics and identity models. Narrative about trauma dominated modern imagination, but also shifted trauma towards

social play. Trauma narrative situates the subject in the field of social forces, determines its position within that field and has the power of differentiation. The right and desired location of the subject can reinforce, boost, multiply and symbolically empower this narrative.

A posttraumatic¹ narrative situates the subject in the field of social forces and decides about its location within this field; it enables raising the symbolic capital (I use this word in the meaning close to Bourdieu's definition)², gives power to create valid ideas of order and justice, locates a victim and an offender, and, finally, establishes effective social discourses. This capital that is needed for changing the status of the community, thereby creates foundations for identity. Therefore, trauma becomes a cultural phenomenon that can be repeated, recreated symmetrically to the original and programmed, it has its own patterns and *loci communes*³.

In this context, it is worth analyzing (on selected examples) the discourse of Polish witnessing to the Holocaust, or rather the Polish phenomena of posttraumatic memory with the Holocaust in the background. These processes and phenomena have been developing for decades, sometimes co-occurring, or, at other times, dominating the social space. My goal here is not to deliver a historical analysis of this process, but to trace some of its essential strategies.

It is worth analyzing various instances of social play around Jewish trauma: the exclusion of some voices, their silencing and recoding, establishing a competitive field of traumatic narratives, the imitations of these narratives and experiences, re-writings of trauma, overwriting its subsequent layers, hostile takeovers⁴ of legitimizing narratives, stakes of these takeovers, the politics of memory, memory grafting, re-acting as the way of legitimating fictionalized memory, recalling selected events and giving them significance.

¹ I understand the post-trauma category not only as a concept pointing at the moment after a catastrophe. The "post" prefix denotes in this case the temporal perspective of enunciation or any expressive mode, but also the perspective of distance and constructivism. It means not only a consciousness marked by trauma, but also that which in the social space becomes the key stakes for identity and social recognition game. A reflection on what strategies are used to construct various forms of remembering present in the posttraumatic space, must be accompanied by questions concerning both what should shape thinking about the future and also what becomes repressed in contemporary forms, consciously marginalized or sentenced to oblivion. Therefore, posttraumatic memory is as much an experienced memory as it is a produced memory.

² P. Bourdieu, *The Forms of the Capital. Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*, 1986. Symbolic capital is a reservoir of economic, social and cultural capitals, which together warrant symbolic domination (compare with symbolic violence), which consists in the power to legitimate the regimes of meaning, to define social roles, determine the stakes of conflicts and goals, and delineate the horizon of the social habitus.

³ These are, of course, not all possible strategies, there are many more. I have chosen those examples which are located in this specific area. The reasons for this decision are explained in conclusions to this text.

⁴ Hostile takeover means, in this particular case, the handling of the trauma capital and directing it against the primary trauma.

Contrary to popular ideas of silent trauma, I want to emphasize the connection of posttraumatic memory with a narrative and fictionalization (Hyden White)⁵: memory is a story that is constantly repeated, foretold, exercised, replayed, and performed. It deletes particular elements, positions others, works them into metaphors and comparisons, and, finally, inscribes them into recognizable patterns.

Examples of strategies: Strategy 1: Suppression

The prevalent conviction that the process of (re)processing the Holocaust trauma required a significant time distance is not supported by facts. The first results of this work were visible already in the 1940s, and here is an example: “Powrót, czyli ślepy tor” (“Return — a blind course”) is a movie produced in 1948. It describes a story of a survivor recoded to the Polish lot. The film shows that Polish culture has already adopted the Jewish trauma; this adoption, however, was made pursuant to particular principles. The story is roughly as follows: the female protagonist returns from the concentration camp to ruined Warsaw, to her once elegant apartment — now it is occupied by neighbours who are surprised by her return and worried that Elżbieta will use her rights and force them to leave the apartment. They are a bit embarrassed, but also confident, settled in their post-war habituation of the place as theirs. However, there is no confrontation, the protagonist dwells in her home thanks to the current occupants’ mercy. The occupied apartment, the neighbours’ fear of losing the newly acquired property, an her child adopted by a well-to-do Polish family, the denial of the past, and constant gratitude of survivors for the right to stay, for tolerating their presence, are the signs of the Jewish trauma. Elżbieta lost everything, also her child that she tries to get back from a Polish family. The character of her daughter who is afraid of her represents the attitude of denial and negation of trauma as an unnatural force that is purely negative or even destructive, atrocious and horrible. Trauma is something that has to be overcome, or actually denied in the process of life revival.

The image of the Jewish trauma in the movie is at the same time clear and blurred, the protagonist is called Elżbieta Gródecka, the word Jew never occurs, and nothing indicates Elżbieta’s Jewishness directly. The characteristic *loci communes* of Jewish trauma cease to be Jewish — Jewishness is hidden, it is subject to universalization that, in fact, goes under the signature of polonization. Trauma becomes the concentration camp, raised to the level of universal human experience, although the “healthy part

⁵ H. White, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007*, Baltimore 2010; idem, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*, Baltimore 1999; idem, “The value of narrativity in the representation of reality”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, *On Narrative* (Autumn 1980), pp. 5–27.

of the nation”, not infected by death, aims only at blocking and erasing trauma from memory. This is a condition and a real purpose of adopting the Jewish trauma. The takeover — polonization and the use of trauma — are accompanied by suppressing the Jewish voice: be quiet about that trauma! Erasing the identity of Jewish victims and transferring it onto the Polish identity have only one thing at stake: the suppression of negativity and development of a homogenous community that needs to be directed didactically towards the future.

Strategy 2: Symmetry

Various posttraumatic strategies are not linear, one does not replace the other, they sometimes occur at the same time, complementing each other, or, to the contrary, clashing into conflict. An important feature of many strategies in the process of creating the Polish trauma after the Holocaust is establishing the Polish and Jewish symmetry, which allows for the subsequent transfer of symbolic capital.

And now I could give plenty of examples⁶. The strategy of symmetrical creation of post-trauma and symbolic transfer occurs often and is visible in various decades. Let's take a look at an important cultural text, namely, Andrzej Wajda's movie from 1995, called “Wielki tydzień” (“The Holy Week”), the adaptation of a story by Jerzy Andrzejewski (published in 1945). A comparison with the literary original emphasizes operations of creating symmetry, transferring, takeover and inversion. Andrzejewski's text describes responses of the Polish society to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943, and reflects the general attitude of Poles to Jews during the Holocaust. Cutting across social strata, the text shows the pre-war and post-war anti-Semitic attitudes as a repetitive and easily recognizable cultural pattern. In Wajda's movie this continuity is erased: the social background fades away, the array of social voices is nulled: the elision of the “voices of the street”, “voices from under the ghetto's walls” deprives the characters of a social base, and their behaviour becomes thus a moral and individual issue; it is now universal and devoid of the specific cultural and social context which produced it and which it would have to face⁷. There are anti-Semites, but there is no anti-Semitism as a broader social phenomenon. In Wajda's movie, trauma becomes the trauma of Poles who rescue Jews — they lose their lives and relatives, their tragedy becomes the most important, the tragedy of the hiding Jewish woman becomes less important, her fate becomes a challenge primarily to by-standers. This shift of perspective means that the charac-

⁶ T. Żukowski, “Wytwarzanie »winy obojętności« oraz kategorii »obojętnego świadka« na przykładzie artykułu Jana Błońskiego »Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto 2013 «”, *Studia Literackie i Historyczne*, nr 2.

⁷ Wajda resigned from all Polish comments from the walls. There is no longer an insurgent hanging from the window who, as say people looking at the walls, is “cool hanging”, there is no onlookers under the walls. No one stops enjoying the view, people are terrified.

ters rescuing and helping Jews become the representative image of the Polish society in its entirety, unlike Piotrowscy who expel Irena from her hideaway. Anti-Semites in the movie are pre-war nationalists or people of lower-class origin, a bit funny and a bit scary, simple-minded, prone to violence, callous, banal, thoughtless and mean. They do not have the same gravity as the moral characters, and, as such, they can only be marginalised, and their (anti-Semitic) opinions discarded as irrelevant within a larger framework. In the movie, Julek cannot be a communist any longer (he is in the novel), Wajda enrolls him to Grey Ranks — the underground scouting organization, making him a character that is more symptomatic of the Polish society or its self-image of heroic resistance to German occupation. Also, Julek cannot be a noble exception and madman; rather, he becomes a part of the Polish pattern. The character of the ardent Catholic Anna also has to be changed — Wajda removes her lines in which she typically asserts that Jews are God-killers who caused their own catastrophe. In the film, Anna is a saint who deeply experiences the Holocaust as a common and personal catastrophe⁸. Wajda introduces a scene which is absent in the novel: a Polish unit of Grey Ranks enters the burning ghetto during the Uprising. The Polish youth, practically children, are the first to help the fighting ghetto, and it is a suicidal, Romantic action, from the heart of the Polish essence, but having little in common with reality. It is worth noticing the contrast between the Jewish woman — Irena, and Julek: he goes fighting in her name and for her, who is hiding. It is a significant scene which proves that, in Wajda's film, a **symbolic transfer** is made: a passive element is ascribed to Jews (Irena and Zamojski), while the active and heroic element is attributed to Poles, though *Holy Week* is a novel about heroic Jews fighting in the ghetto and "poor Poles" who only "look at the ghetto" and whose sin, according to Błoński's words,⁹ is their indifference¹⁰. It's an essential change. Wajda's movie concentrates on presenting the evidence of Polish heroic bravery. A story about hiding and betraying Jews, and the Polish attitude to the Holocaust becomes a story about moral challenges that Poles (and, at least, those who deserve this name and whom the audience can symbolically identify with) managed to face (or could have if not for the neighbours, Piotrowscy), and paid for it with their own lives. The initial creation of symmetry leads then to transferring trauma from Jews onto Poles, and in the profound inversion of signs. So, the takeover and use of symbolic capital of the Holocaust with the effect of appropriating the symbolic power it carried have been made manifest in the film. Polish trauma has overwritten itself with Jewish

⁸ The character of Anna or "true Catholic" effectively precludes any questions about the historical and factual relationship Catholicism and anti-Semitism.

⁹ I refer here to the famous essay by Jan Błoński, "Biedny Polak patrzy na getto" (The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto), where the author puts the blame on Poles for indifference, cool and disengaged gaze, and withdrawing from action.

¹⁰ Scenes of entrance to the ghetto of the troops are interspersed with images of Irene staying in bed. Let us add: Irena is passive and the young soldiers who move to the hopeless battle, sacrificing their lives in sacrifice, are active.

trauma, it has become the second-degree trauma, grounded in a construction of a higher-tier victim by symbolic assimilation of Jewish trauma.

Strategy 3: The hostile takeover

In my considerations, I have been omitting the context of politics of memory, essential for all the described phenomena and strategies. I understand the politics of memory broadly: as institutional frames of historical narratives, prompting a single narrative and geared towards the development of a homogenous story with a clear propaganda tendency associated with the immunization of a group's identity. Many practices of the politics of memory reveal a deep connection of politics with memory. These practices provide ample evidence that it is difficult to treat memory as an independent medium, mediating between the past and present, sometimes and episodically used by the politics of memory or distorted by ideology. It should be rather shown that memory is a key asset within the field of power. A story about the past also has the (often omitted) function of being a means to pursue, maintain or take away the symbolic advantage. In the case of our object of interest, namely, post-trauma or trauma created with the Holocaust in the background, we can speak about multiple politics of memory and we need to remember that the subject of the politics of memory has not always to be a political authority. Social policies, cultural and identity policies all take part in the same bidding: the protection of group identity, and the hegemony of a sacrificial and heroic story of the distinguished "We." Politics of memory creates thus a competitive field which necessarily includes various narratives as acceptable or denied.

One of many examples of a manifest politics of memory concerning the Holocaust was a tactic developed around March 1968, of contrasting the Holocaust with the massacre and massive displacements that took place in Zamojszczyzna¹¹. Zamojszczyzna was to become the anti-trauma for the Holocaust — its task was to compete with the Holocaust effectively, which is to diminish and obliterate it. This policy was made not only by political or national institutions in the time of heightened anti-Semitic attitudes at the highest echelons of the communist apparatus in Poland, but also by various social players, academic historians and popularisers, journalists, and also mass literature¹².

¹¹ Dzieci Zamojszczyzny (The Kids of Zamojszczyzna) — "Aktion Zamość" was a Nazi Germany project of forced resettlement of the population inhabiting that region, taking place from November 1942 to March 1943. The region of Zamojszczyzna was planned as the place of settlement of ethnic German population from other European countries, within the framework of creating the life-space for Germany. An estimated number of 30 000 children were resettled, including those who were adopted by German families and whose Polish origins were subsequently erased.

¹² See e.g. W. Zawada, *Kaktusy z Zielonej ulicy* (1967), *Wielka wojna z czarną flagą* (1968), *Leśna szkoła strzelca Kaktusa* (1969) — the novels for young people.

The book by Anna Janko *Mała Zagłada* (*The Small Holocaust*, 2015)¹³ fits in this old and what seemed to be long forgotten current. The title itself suggests identifying with experiencing the Holocaust, but it also carries an important difference: a different extermination will be the subject — “a small one” instead of the massive extermination of Jews that draws attention. The narrator is a daughter of a victim — a child from Zamojszczyzna, a girl rescued somehow from the massacre in which her parents (grandparents of the narrator) died. In Janko’s considerations the characteristic elements of trauma are clear, they are expressed directly. So, there are elements such as: the sovereignty of trauma over the subject, inexpressibility, wordlessness, corporality. We recognize other characteristic common features: a lack of proper language to tell about trauma, silence, muteness. However, trauma is at the same time the subject of conversations, direct considerations, discussions, generalizations. The mother talks and cannot talk, she passes on her experience to her daughter by osmosis. “I imagine or remember. Fear is a sort of memory (...). Hereditary fear, passed on in prenatal life, sucked with the mother’s milk.” (page 9–10). The mother and daughter connected with each other by the placenta of trauma are actually an inseparable subject, you can even say that the daughter’s trauma is richer — complemented by the trauma of other by-standers, historical readings, it accumulates a disarray of experiences and voices to become a self-aware trauma.

Trauma is genetically inherited, Janko resorts to naturalistic and genetic imagining, “genes cry” (page 18–20), genes are immortal, they record and transfer experiences of generations. Trauma cumulates, enriches, accrues, it can be said that it earns interest. It’s not the memory of the second generation that was risen under the shade of their parents’ trauma, but a direct connection to someone else’s memory. Trauma becomes a family legacy, an equity in fact, it is treated as a deposit or capital that has to be taken over and multiplied. This accruing and multiplication of trauma and increasing memory does not exclude, paradoxically, loss, amnesia, fading memory that occur individually (the mother loses her memory) and collectively (the amnesia of the Polish society concerning Zamojszczyzna). It is also worth mentioning that this alleged collective amnesia and denial described by Janko concern one of the most visible signs of the politics of memory of the turn of the 60s and 70s, and there can be no question about any forgetting in the past. The strategy of *Mała zagłada* can be described as injecting the allegedly denied trauma in social and historical public awareness.

In *Mała Zagłada* memory is reconstructed, it develops according to a clear model — in the manner of the trauma of the Holocaust which, as I have mentioned at the beginning, became a paradigmatic event. The strategy of both confirmation and disconfirmation is visible in the text. The symmetry of Polish and Jewish sufferings is also clearly visible, Jewish and Polish victims are named in one breath¹⁴, the

¹³ A. Janko, *Mała Zagłada*, Kraków 2015. The generically complex book contains elements of memoir, essay, and, also, of fictional narrative. All quotations are from this edition.

¹⁴ See also pp. 83, 91.

threads of the story interweave in such a way that the reader gets lost and has an impression of a great horror that affected both Poles and Jews. This uniform and generalized sense of horror suggests that the fate of Jews and Poles was the same — it is one big war trauma.

The distinctive tendency is equally strong. The author constantly compares both traumas, weighs their specific gravities: the Jewish trauma is deducted from, and the Polish one has to be added to in order to equal the calculations. Janko discusses the issue of the Polish guilt and the Jewish guilt. She limits the Polish role to abandonment, traditionally. The author reduces any doubts concerning this issue to the absurd, which enables her to avoid confrontation with a real question: were Poles really traumatized or passive by-standers, or important actors in the Holocaust, and did their anti-Semitism and attitude towards Jews significantly contribute to the effectiveness of the Holocaust? Janko cannot ask this question, because she would have to answer it and this answer could be uncomfortable. Instead, she repeats the catalogue of classic justifications: others were the same or worse, Poles have many trees in Yad Vashem, helping Jews was punished by death penalty in Poland, and Jews were no saints either. Janko does not hesitate to use an image from Goebbels's propaganda, namely, the ghetto which entertains itself and indulges in luxury in front of people dying from hunger¹⁵. And anti-Semitism is considered to be marginal, and is pointed by a truism: there are scums in every society (page 206–207), and in any case, it is nevertheless a German plague that was spread throughout Europe. It is a common phenomenon not limited to Poland, the specific spirit of the times, so there can be no question about the issue of the Polish guilt. Certainly, Polish anti-Semitism — injected from the outside and actually new, cannot be treated as a social phenomenon, on the contrary, it's always the issue of individual responsibility and underclass which infringes the rights of public morality. Compared to Europe, Poland shows rather good according to Janko, since new national regimes participated in killing Jews in other places. The efforts of justifying the national community or removing the question about the Polish guilt are seen in *Mała zagłada* all the time¹⁶.

Mała zagłada has been recently, I think, the clearest example of how posttraumatic narratives in Poland create a competitive field and are subject to a strong influence of the politics of memory, although, obviously, it's not an only or sparse example. All the cultural texts presented by me are situated in the competitive field of traumatic narratives, in the field of the politics of memory that is overwritten with personal experience.

The stakes of the competition are clear: it is about the limitation, silencing, and sometimes exclusion of a Jewish narrative considered competitive to the Polish identity (Jewish), pushing it out of the field, and taking away its symbolic power. It is a game of recognition and self-image, a game in which history and experience become

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 134.

the hostages of identity. This identity that is constantly perceived as an endangered, delicate, uncertain entity produces, strengthens, supports, and plays the discourse of suffering, of victimhood and moral superiority. According to the logic of competition, its position is the stronger, the more strongly it will use the field of trauma, the more scores it will take away from the alleged opponent. Therefore, comparison, generalization and relativization will be the basic figure of post-trauma. A Polish bystander as a figure of discourse aims at taking over the symbolic capital of the Jewish trauma. The instrumentalization of the Holocaust and its recurrent updating seem to be an important strategy of developing Polish identity. In fact, in many cases we can talk not only about a takeover but also about a hostile takeover which aims at silencing the Jewish voice.

To conclude, I would like to say a few words that would explain my stance and my choices. First of all, why I use the category of trauma in connection with “capital” and why I do not use the word “experience”. As I have mentioned at the beginning, trauma became a paradigmatic event, as post-trauma it has formed repetitive and recognizable poetics, but most of all, pragmatics. Post-trauma, with its strong power of signification, is also a symbolic power or sometimes a tool of this power, it can be considered in terms of capital that, metaphorically, brings profits, can go up and down, increases or decreases, but most of all, places and stratifies agents in the cultural and social field. The category of “experience”, though popular in traumatological studies, to me seems to be void, because it uses the aura of directness (experience belongs directly to the subject) and undoubtedness (you cannot question someone’s experience). If we want to consider post-trauma as a phenomenon with a strong pragmatic background, if we want to analyze convolutions of posttraumatic discourse, analyze the fields of powers and stakes that it determines, the category of experience hides more than it reveals.

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