Ceremonial events at non-sites of memory: Seven framings of a difficult past

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Abstract

Abstract: The author discusses uncommemorated and under-remembered sites of past violence in terms of the conditions of their transformation into memory sites. Commemorative ceremonies, which may be staged at non-sites of memory, are presented as affective media of memory and identity, demonstrating social responses to the sites, as well as placing the local past in the context of supra-local memory forms. The argument is grounded in the material gathered from fieldwork during the research project on uncommemorated sites of genocide in Poland and, predominantly, in a detailed case study of a ceremony witnessed by the author in 2016 in Radecznica (Lublin Voivodship) at a burial site of victims of the "Holocaust by bullets". In the article the discourse of speeches delivered during the ceremony is analyzed, on the assumption that they can reveal rules of national Polish memory culture dictating what may be commemorated and how cultural mechanisms have a power to hinder commemoration. As a result, seven distinctive framings of past events that kept returning in subsequent speeches were identified and interpreted as "memory devices" that enable and facilitate recollection, but also mark out the limits of what can be remembered and passed on.

Key Words

non-sites of memory, ceremonies, Polish memory culture, Holocaust, Radecznica, memory device

Introduction

East-Central European landscape encompasses multiple unmemorialized and under-remembered sites of past violence, related to the Holocaust, but also to ethnic conflicts during and right after World War II. Lacking full and/or official information, delimitation and commemoration, these sites often still contain human remains, although they have not typically been a stage of any religious or secular ritual to neutralize their presence. Roma Sendyka dubbed these localizations "non-sites of memory", pointing out that "the victims who should be commemorated on such sites typically have a collective identity (usually ethnic) distinct from the society currently living in the area, whose self-conception is threatened by the occurrence of the non-site of memory"; as a result, non-sites can be problematically "transformed, manipulated, neglected, or contested" (2016b: 700). Despite manifest abandonment, however, non-sites of memory are not en-

tirely excluded from the society's memorial activity, and occasionally can invite various forms of commemoration, even though these commemorative processes are never ultimately or successfully completed. Non-sites of memory are thus being delineated, traced, talked and written about, temporarily marked, and, sometimes, officially commemorated, usually with the use of some forms of monuments (which may also be challenged, subjected to changes, removed later on). The establishment of a monument or memorial is one of many possible ways of transforming a site into a *lieu de mémoire*, fortunately appealing to collective memory and historical consciousness (although there is no guarantee of that). It is also an occasion on which non-sites of memory may become the stage of ceremonial events. In the course of research of non-sites of memory, I had the opportunity to participate in an event of this kind. In this paper I interpret the ceremonial event in terms of memory forms that were performatively introduced within it.

According to literature, performative practices such as holiday celebrations, anniversaries, ceremonies, funerals, and religious services are considered affective media of memory (Erll and Rigney 2009, Kosiński 2010, Assmann 2011, Erll 2011) that produce identity and integration of a group (Olick 2007). Ceremonies reveal, repeat, and strengthen the dominants of a memory culture that frame past events' understanding. Speeches delivered at commemorative ceremonies express common values and shared ideologies of the "in-group", allow us to observe representation of the past in the context of present politics and its role in creating collective (and especially national) self-image and identity (Olick 2007, Reisigl 2008, Wodak 2010, Riehn 2019). A careful "reading" of commemoration forms reveals general remembrance trends, including official interpretations of the past, popular myths and common desires that the forms reflect, along with the use of commemoration to manipulate public memory (Carrier 1996). This perspective was usually applied to study "central" commemorative events organized on a national level, often in the context of established *lieux de mémoire*. An attempt to commemorate a non-site, in turn, represents a struggle for recognition of minority memory rather than a celebration of communal remembrance. The public inauguration of a monument in a non-site of memory demonstrates social responses to the site, ways of referring to and processing it, as well as placing the local past in the context of supra-local memory forms.

The ceremonial event which I discuss in this paper was organized at the site commonly called "Drugie Doły" ("Second Pits"), a wooded gully in the vicinity of Radecznica, a village in the Lublin Voivodship (south-eastern Poland). It was there that in December 1942 Germans shot and buried ten Jewish Poles from nearby areas, who had previously been hiding in a dugout in a forest. The site, recounted by a Polish bystander, was investigated, marked and commemorated with a modest memorial no sooner than in 2016, thanks to the work of the Rabbinical Commission for Jewish Cemeteries in Poland and the Zapomniane ("Forgotten") Foundation.[1] The event organized on that occasion, on September 2, 2016, is one of the first efforts directed towards the Radecznica community to commemorate the local history of the Holocaust in the village. In the course of the ceremony, several people gave speeches: Agnieszka Nieradko, representing the Rabbinical Commission and the Zapomniane Foundation; Edward Polak, the mayor of Radecznica; Michael Schudrich, the Chief Rabbi of Poland; Mieczysław Cisło, the auxiliary bishop at the Lublin archdiocese, and until June 2016, the chair of the Council for Religious Dialogue of the Polish Episcopal Conference; and Marianna Zybała, a resident of Radecznica and the widow of Stanisław Zybała, a local guardian of memory, with whom she protected the memory of the wartime events.

The Zybałas ran the unofficial archive of the village, collecting documents and testimonies, co-authored multiple brochures on regional history, generously sharing their expertise with locals and travelling visitors. It is mostly thanks to their actions that the history of several unmarked Holocaust burial sites in Radecznica has recently been unveiled. The ceremony was attended by a significant group of pupils and teachers of the public school in Radecznica; however, there were hardly any other inhabitants of the village apart from Marianna Zybała and her relatives.

In the course of the article, I analyze the discourse of the speeches delivered at Second Pits, assuming that they can reveal cultural rules dictating what may be commemorated and how. This serves to uncover and look critically at the relations between dominants of the Polish memory culture and particular, local cases of potentially painful memory. The tension demonstrates that, despite tendencies prevalent in official commemoration, collective historical consciousness and politics of memory, Polish memory field is not a homogeneous one. Throughout the ceremony, non-dominant, minority perspectives within it can be observed as confronted with the master narrative. As Maria Janion put it in her authoritative work, the Polish positive self-image is grounded in a "narrative about our outstanding suffering and merits, our grandeur and superiority" (2006: 12), which served as a compensation during prolonged period of Polish non-independence, and resulted in activating defense mechanisms against questioning the narrative. The narrative produces self-concentrated, non-inclusive, and particularly sensitive remembrance structures, prone to defensive reactions to any challenge. Non-sites of memory, in fact, can provide illustrative examples of such challenges. They are not (properly) commemorated for multiple reasons, starting with ethnic difference between victims of past violence that happened at the site and its contemporary neighbors. (The minimum conditions of "proper commemoration" require fully acknowledging historical truth about the past, showing respect to the victims and observing usual traditional rules and/or rituals of cultural [religious, national, ethnic] group they belonged to. Memorial plaques avoiding direct identification of victims or perpetrators may serve as examples of "improper/insufficient commemoration".) Even though possible reasons for leaving a particular site unmarked can be complex, general lack of commemoration of sites of the "Holocaust by bullets" (Desbois 2008) is in line, at best, with the history of Polish disinterest in the fate of their Jewish fellow citizens and their indifference (if not hostility) towards them. Frequently, the history of non-sites of memory brings back indirect and direct Polish complicity in the murders of Jews, when their present abandonment can enhance the meticulously restrained sense of guilt. All this is hard to

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1   The Commission was established to supervise Jewish cemeteries in Poland alongside the Jewish Community of Warsaw and to work on locating Holocaust unmarked grave sites. The Foundation was created in 2014 by the members of the Commission and works in close cooperation with the latter, supervised by the Chief Rabbi of Poland.

integrate into the aforementioned self-image of the group, within which it is Polish suffering that predominates.

Insufficient commemoration does not, of course, equate to absence of any form of (collective) memory. Our research on non-sites of memory has revealed that neighboring communities do not "forget" the difficult past, but maintain a certain relation to it and tacit knowledge about it, albeit underdeveloped and often non-verbal. As Roma Sendyka proposes in this context, "non-memory" can be understood as "inclusive term comprising these elements of remembering processes that resist symbolization" (2016a: 266) – not in stark contrast to memory, but to disclose how the two are inextricably intertwined. "Non-memory" marks a relation to the past which lacks official language to be articulated, and is neither assimilated nor absent. The speakers at the ceremony are thus supposed, putting it in general terms, to transform non-memory into a form of memory: to make it expressible and coordinate it with "official" remembrance. For this purpose, they have to propose, in accordance with their sensitivities, a form of commemorating the events of the Second Pits which would be appropriate, understandable, effective and acceptable for the entire community. This kind of reinterpretation of a non-site of memory requires placing it within the framework of familiar and understandable constructions of meaning, which take the form of general perceptive rules, narratives or images, recurring figures or even stereotypes. This familiar framework provides tools or "devices" enabling people to add challenging content to their existing universe of memory.

In conducting research into the Radecznica event, I identified seven contexts or sets of signs and meanings that keep recurring in the words of the speakers in their efforts to deal with the problem of non-sites of memory. Each of these ways of working on memory could be deemed a "memory device" (Kobielska 2017): a cultural apparatus (in Foucauldian sense – see Foucault 1980) that produces tendencies of remembering by encouraging, supporting and modifying mnemonic content for its users – helping them remember in some ways whilst discrediting others (Basu 2011). Apparatuses manage their subjects: who remembers with the use of a "memory device", adopts a position of a "remembering subject" defined by what the device offers. By putting forward certain ways of framing the past, memory devices enable and facilitate recollection, but also mark out the limits of what *can be* remembered and passed on. To identify the devices, I apply the perspective of rhetorical analysis to the subsequent speeches with the aim to unpack the general structure of arguments as well as details of wording and style, while also paying attention to the speakers' performance. Patterns of addressing the past are deduced from micro-analysis of utterances rather than from pre-existent knowledge of remembrance conventions present in literature. I assume that speakers may refer to and transform historically accrued conventions whether they are aware of the pattern or not.

1. "Fate wanted it so": The course of history

The events in the Second Pits are sometimes described with phrases that refer to an impersonal course of history ("Fate wanted it so, the wheel of history turned here, through that very gully" [Nieradko]). They are euphemisms, allowing to avoid direct referring to history of brutal violence and death that does not make a literal appearance here; it is referred to delicately and cautiously, in general terms (such as "fate") alleviating discomfort that more precise depiction might cause. It could be also described as "neutralization": a difficult past comes across in this conception as a symptom of the general functioning of history and its natural caprice. No one is cast as accountable, the past is the product of chance or the decisions of superhuman forces. Memory of events framed in this way is meant to carefully avoid possible conflicts or controversies; the emotions prompted are rather those of sadness and compassion for the victims.

2. "They would have been your neighbors": About "normal" people

In many of the speeches a narrative appeared that emphasized a real or potential connection between victims (or more broadly: Jewish Poles) and the members of the Polish community of that time or of today – especially in its local form ("We know that they lived here […], if it were not for the Holocaust, their progeny would probably live among us, would be your neighbors, schoolmates, colleagues from work, co-workers" [Nieradko], "they were our neighbors, our close friends" [Cisło]).

This kind of semiotic structure is clearly intended to bring contemporaries closer to the victims from the past, to develop empathy, uncover common features and common experiences, and in this way create a justification for the practices of memory the contemporary audience *should* implement. At the same time, these gestures of intimacy not only partially misrepresent history, removing cases of non-friendly, distant or hostile relations between Jews and Poles from the picture, but also may paradoxically emphasize difference, creating what Janicka and Żukowski (2016) call a philosemitic narrative, a seemingly paradoxical form of exclusion and violence. Stressing that members of both groups were (or might have been) friends suggests that there is something special about this kind of friendship – in contrast to analogous relations within each group that are perceived as self-evident, and paradoxically contributes to the process of *othering*. This paradox is clearly visible in the next sentence of Cisło's speech: "The difference could not be seen, it was also a friend". A Jewish girl (he refers here to the relation between Stanisław Zybała and his schoolmate) was not simply a friend of a non-Jewish Pole, but only could *also* be one; the friends could be close enough for the speaker to declare that the difference *could not be seen*, but not enough to say that there was *no* difference.

3. "Both societies got on very well": On the Polish-Jewish brotherhood

Attempts at building a positive history figure prominently in the well-known story about the peaceful coexistence of Jewish and non-Jewish Polish people before the outbreak of World War II, replete with claims of the "brotherhood" between Jews and Catholics. This is a myth, not only oversimplifying real history, but often putting forward its inadequate image, contradicting frequent tensions, inequalities, and antisemitism among pre-war Polish society. Its traces are clearly visible in Edward Polak's speech:

> *We should also remember, I think, that the history of the Jewish community in our area, in Radecznica, goes back to the 19th century. [...] Both societies [sic – społeczeństwa], Polish and Jewish, got on very well, lived very well together in peace, in accord;*

as well as Mieczysław Cisło's address to "dear Jews, also our brothers", and repeating phrases about our "elder brothers in faith", sanctioned by the authority of John Paul II.

From these words about harmonious coexistence, brotherhood and friendship, there steadily emerges the image of the "good Jew" anticipating and refuting the negative stereotype that may automatically appear in the minds of some listeners, according to which Jews, typical figures of 'others', are associated with deviousness and ingratitude (Cała 1995, 2012). The short statement given at the event by Michael Schudrich, who emphatically expressed his gratitude and belief in the power of harmonious cooperation, might have reverberated analogically around the participants, seeing in him the model of the "grateful Jew".

Once again, the desire to bring Jews and Poles closer and to justify the remembrance by Polish people of Jewish victims sometimes seems to risk backfiring, and gestures of intimacy transform into "othering". Or rather: undertaking the attempt to share compassionate memory on the basis of solidarity reveals, in a natural way, obstacles this attempt meets when confronted with Polish memory culture. A striking formula from Polak's speech unintentionally illustrates the case: those who "got on very well" and "lived together in peace" were not compatriots, fellow citizens, or even members of different groups, but two separate "societies".

4. "Only because they were Jews": Fixed figures of the Holocaust memory

Among the contexts which provide a framework for the history of Second Pits is a certain typical way of speaking about the Holocaust – reiterated both at the national level and in the international memory of the Holocaust ("All

Jews met their death – only because, only because they were Jews" [Polak]; "the great tragedy of the Jewish nation", whose "complete annihilation had been announced by Hitler", mobilizing a "machine of death" [Cisło]).

The use of these phrases certainly does have an explanatory function, placing the case of Radecznica against the backdrop of widely known conceptual structures that organize the key events of the twentieth century, and so making it an important case in its own right. The direct reference to the Holocaust of Jews and its unprecedented scale often is yet offset by the next context.

5. "The great tragedy of our nation": The context of Polish martyrdom

Elements of Polish historical memory about World War II, with particular reference to national martyrdom, turn out to be an essential context for speaking about the Holocaust ("Poland is studded with the graves of Jewish victims. Just as it is with the graves of Polish soldiers who fell in fighting the German occupier" [Cisło]). The whole ceremony refers above all to non-Polish suffering and death; as a result, the defense mechanisms, as mentioned above, are activated, to prevent destabilizing the time-honored hierarchy of Polish memory culture. The juxtaposition of "Polish and Jewish graves" seeks to neutralize this danger, disavowing obvious discrepancy in numbers of victims, circumstances of their death, and maintenance of burial sites. This logic of "neutralizing dangers", typical in the field of Polish war memory, operates within the framework of competitive memory, as if collective remembering was a narrow space in which distinct and separate groups compete for limited resources (the logic acutely described – and criticized – by Michael Rothberg [2009]). On the other hand, taking into consideration historical consciousness of the listeners, there may be paradoxically an *increase* in the awareness and memory of the Holocaust in Radecznica. Showing it as parallel to Polish suffering does not (or rather: does not only) remove its status as unique but may also increase its significance. The juxtaposition, problematic as it is, suggests a memory pattern that is understandable and feasible for its future users, thus it can be interpreted as a step towards (partial) remembrance.

6. "Oh, I don't know who betrayed them, who betrayed": The question of Polish complicity

The circumstances of the executions in Second Pits are not entirely clear. The betrayal of those hiding in the dugout by non-Jewish Poles seems highly probable but has not been backed up by hard proof thus far. This issue only appeared in two of the speeches: those of Marianna Zybała and Mieczysław Cisło. I will quote a relevant part of the testimonial speech of the former:

The one who was bringing food had the biggest problem, not to be nabbed by the Germans or some … [Poles] who could tell on [them]… that something is going on. And that's how it was. A long time. Oh, I don't know who betrayed them, who betrayed, probably people from Latycka Kolonia [village nearby] betrayed them […]. After all, the Turobin Schupo [department of the Schutzpolizei from the nearby Turobin] didn't know there were ten Jewish people here.

The way Marianna Zybała makes her accusation throws down a challenge – both to the local community and to the broader models of the "correct" Polish memory, focusing, as shown above, on the maintenance of the positive self-image. Her statement also reveals the difficulties of voicing this accusation out at all – evident in the many ellipses she uses. She refers to the danger to the Jewish people represented by the part of the Polish community who could denounce them; but she uses a pseudonym, referring to them with a fragmentary phrase "some… who could tell on… that something…" Her moving, almost explosive repetition, "Oh, I don't know who betrayed them, who betrayed", the most important statement in the present context, is formulated as the answer to a question, a question that actually no one asked: "Who betrayed them?" If someone *had* asked this question, the situation of Zybała would have been easier: the responsibility for opening this discussion would have lain with someone else. I understand this moment in her speech as an expression of feeling besieged, including by her own sense of duty to bear witness and that by fulfilling that duty she is breaking with the silent consensus of Radecznica and Poland's memory. The thrice repeated "betray" adds significant power, particularly in its proximity to the earlier verbs "to nab" and "tell on". In a key moment, Zybała decided to use a verb that represents harm, a fundamental withdrawal from all principles or values and trust.

By contrast, the words of the bishop on the guilt of unidentified members of the Polish community were literally surrounded by remarks on Polish merit: "*Few [Jews] were saved. Those that were, were saved thanks to kind, brave people who helped them hide.* But as we have been hearing, there was no lack of treacherous people who denounced, reported. That was how those who were here died, not discovered by Germans – someone informed on them. *But in every nation there are wicked people, but there are also heroes. Just as our Mayor recalled, a local Polish family was also shot* […]". Betrayal becomes if not the exception among Poles, then at least a universal element that coexists with heroism; it is found everywhere and does not affect Polish group in particular. The "losses" to the Polish self-image (Żukowski 2018), evident when the "wicked people" are mentioned, need to be compensated for. Acknowledgment of "heroes" and "brave people" stands for the compensation. The short paragraph, rhetorically organized by the speaker, is enough to reveal the mechanism in all its power.

7. "I would like to emphasize at this point that Poland …": help for the Jews

The history of Second Pits does not speak about Jews being saved by Poles. From the perspective of "funerary" ceremony, devoted to the retrieval of the names of the dead and the restoration of their memory, it would seem there is no need to spend a significant part of the event recalling Polish acts of the help. But that would mean ignoring the prevailing rules governing the Polish memory culture.

These rules have already been precisely identified by researchers (Kowalska-Leder 2017, Molisak 2017, Żukowski 2018) and they point to the statement cited above: a condition of alluding to Polish guilt is to immediately recall Polish heroes and martyrs. Other speeches make the rule even stronger. Consideration of Polish noble acts is a condition for mere mentioning Jewish suffering and death:

[They died] just because they were Jews. That… I would like to emphasize at this point that Poland was an occupied country, and for sure the only country in the whole of Europe, in Europe under Nazi German occupation, where any help given to Jews was punished by death. […] And even a good example is a case that is little known here: a family from our commune, from Gruszka Zaporska, was simply shot for hiding six Jews. [Polak]

The cited statement reveals the tension related to speaking about the Holocaust. And the remedy for that discomfort is a clear and arbitrary change of subject – a sudden return to safe, familiar space where obvious, internalized principles apply and one speaks about Polish dedication and heroism. As a result, during the "funerary" event in honor of the murdered Radecznica Jews, we found out about – and at great length – the risks taken by Polish heroes saving some Jewish people *entirely unconnected* to the story. Here was an answer to an unformulated question, an unexpressed accusation: Why were they not saved? The reservations put by the speaker – "I would like to emphasize at this point …" – would be a logical line of defense to a hypothetical intervention that would upset the comfortable consensus of Polish memory. The reaction is clearly pre-emptive, actually – more allergic.

The Radecznica event provides confirmation that the memory of Polish Righteous Among the Nations – and more broadly, of Poles saving Jews (Molisak 2017) – has become an obligatory addition to memory of the Holocaust. It is telling that all the speakers fulfilled this "obligation", albeit in different ways: while Marianna Zybała mentioned Poles supplying those hiding with food and water, other speakers unanimously paid their tribute to Solowski family from Gruszka Zaporska, brought up in Cisło's and Polak's speeches quoted above, and referred to saving Jews as to a standard for Polish wartime community.

Conclusion

A detailed analysis of the event that transformed a non-site of memory into a commemorated site has allowed me to identify the main factor "behind the scenes". Though the need to commemorate the victims officially, the point of the event itself, is recognized and realized by all the speakers, this turns out to be, within the framework of Polish memory culture, a difficult, uncomfortable and questionable task. The speakers' discomfort, apparent when analyzing the speeches, in turn, leads to the need to accustom themselves to the situation, to sanction the event, make the entire situation easier, more acceptable. To this end the devices I have listed are employed, needed although the event was planned and carried out in an atmosphere of conciliation. The consensus regarding Polish memory concerning World War II is essentially left untouched, but even the slightest shift of emphasis – perhaps the focus on previously uncommemorated Jewish victims was itself enough – brought about the mobilization of defense mechanisms.

To sum up, the seven devices are techniques for reconciling new elements with existing dispositions of the culture of memory; that is to say: for facilitating remembrance and recollection. They have a few features in common: to provide interpretation – to make the history of Second Pits understandable and meaningful; to relieve any possible discomfort, or other negative emotions; and, finally, to encourage memorial practices. The techniques realize these functions to a varying degree. In the first case, the history of Second Pits becomes understandable as a reflection of the changing course of fate – inspiring compassion but burdening no one's conscience. The "neighborly" formula brings the victims closer to contemporary Poles. The narrative of Polish-Jewish brotherhood, working in a similar way, adds further elements. The idealized past becomes the precedent for good relations between groups, establishing an ideal to aspire to for contemporary Poles. These techniques would convince us that the murdered Jews "deserve" to be remembered: as imagined neighbors, as similar to the contemporary "us", as friends – and yet they also serve the positive self-image of the Polish majority. Using the fourth device – the codes of memory about the Holocaust – provides a comprehensible context, a whole for the part that is local history, and provides not only meaning but validation. This, however, leads to the potential for anxiety in the majority's memory which has a competitive nature. As a result, the techniques described perform a complicated balancing act: "disturbing" elements and "alleviating" elements intertwine and, to a certain extent, neutralize each other by means of their constant juxtaposition. The fifth of the devices, the context of Polish martyrdom, causes the Holocaust to be placed alongside Polish suffering and thereby to become less exceptional but more understandable – and perhaps closer. It is also a key element of a positive self-image. The sixth semiotic context – the problem of Polish complicity – is that which most of all cries out

for a soothing reaction, for reframing. The most powerful device for this purpose is the argument from help for the Jews, which again serves to save the Polish self-image.

Non-sites of memory seem to be a difficult area for memory cultures, but for this very reason they may become a litmus test: revealing the culture's mechanisms, strength and limitations in action. The seven framings of the past identified in the course of analysis are grounded in the context of Polish official memory, collective memory and common identity; it is probable, however, that parallel mechanisms can be observed in different national and historical contexts. In the field of Polish culture of memory, the same (or analogous) framings may possibly be applied to cases of difficult past that are not necessarily embodied in particular non-sites of memory, under the conditions that (1) a minority perspective on the past is evoked and activates the discomfort and defense mechanisms while (2) a speaker nonetheless strives to acknowledge it.

The memory devices analyzed in this article provide a double function for the difficult memory of non-sites. First of all, they can open the way for a universe of shared remembering: opening that memory to familiar structures, explaining the past and bringing it closer to users of the memory culture. Here we enter into an (albeit limited) negotiation on the consensus about the past, filling out collective memory with elements that are currently missing from its accepted, common, and shared form. This process can be described as assimilating a difficult memory. However, this leads to another aspect mentioned already: assimilation (Janicka 2015) also means that difficult memory becomes easier, and its aspects that are the most troublesome for the community become alleviated. A condition of its acceptance is a reduction in its explosive potential.

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Acknowledgements

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