

The Memory of the Second World War in Poland

Rafał Żytniec

Because of the complexity of the Polish memory of the Second World War and the time constraints, this presentation aims at providing a general outline of, and introduction to the theme. To begin with, we need to set the overall notional framework for our considerations, that is, primarily, define the concept and functions of collective memory.

Memory and Identity

For more than twenty years now, the issue of collective memory has attracted unabated interest across the humanities which, over the course of time, have developed a number of useful research and analytical tools. From amongst the numerous various attempts to put the concept of collective memory in a notional framework, I would like to pick a very extensive definition of social memory offered by the Polish sociologist Barbara Szacka:

Social memory is a set of images about the past of a group as well as all characters and events from that past, which are commemorated in a variety of ways, and these include also various forms of such commemoration.¹

As regards the functions of social memory, in the context of the Polish memory of the Second World War, note should be made, above all, of its legitimizing and identity-creating functions. Indeed, social memory provides political legitimisation for the state organisation which “claims the exclusive right to define what is to be commemorated and how the past is to be interpreted, and rules by manipulating symbols, values and combinations of meanings.”² As far as the role of memory in creating identity is concerned, on the other hand

The awareness of the common past is the awareness of shared existence in time, a common fate and common ancestors. This is also a shared repertoire of symbolic signs in which social memory transforms events and characters from the past. This symbolic language is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the group, and the ability to use it makes an individual its rightful member. This is also a set of identifiers which facilitate the distinction between fellow countrymen and aliens.³

¹ Barbara Szacka: “Pamięć społeczna”, in: Zbigniew Bokszański (ed.): *Encyklopedia Socjologii*, vol. 3, p. 52-55, here, p. 52.

² Ibidem, p. 54.

³ Ibidem.

Polish Memory of the Second World War

At the outset, I would like to put forward a thesis which sounds rather trivial at first glance: World War II continues to be one of the primary points of reference not only for the Polish memory but for the collective memory of the whole of Eastern Europe. It also continues to exert a powerful influence on collective identities of this patch of our continent. A excellent illustration of this is the statement by the Polish Prime Minister and head of the "Law and Justice" (PiS) political party, Jarosław Kaczyński, during the famous "war over the square root" in 2007, that is the dispute over the voting system in the European Parliament. Demanding a higher number of votes for Poland, Kaczyński brought up the argument of the losses in the Polish population during the Second World War: "If Poland had not had to live through the years of 1939-45, Poland would be today looking at the demographics of a country of 66 million."⁴ It is no surprise then, that the statement raised controversies not only in Poland but also internationally.

Following Robert Traba⁵, I distinguish the following periods in the evolution of the Polish memory of the Second World War during the time of People's Republic of Poland (PRL):

1. 1944/45-1949. Time of "vivid memory", with close proximity of traumatic war experiences (which resulted in great emotional engagement of society) and a public discussion, not yet completely monopolized by the state, on the consolidation of the memory of the war.⁶
2. The 1950s – 1970s as a period of "legalised memory" and an attempt to "resuscitate the memory" after 1980. A characteristic of that time was an "explosion of initiatives commemorating the war", which, however, amounted largely to the monopolization of the memory by the state in two dimensions: ideological one, that is "the victory of the Peoples' Motherland", and the martyrology caused by Nazi occupiers only; and the national dimension, meaning the martyrology of the Polish nation only.⁷

Further on, Traba points to the five elements which were popularised in the collective memory of the PRL times: the fighting of the People's Army of Poland (LWP), the Polish-

⁴ German press being critical of J. Kaczyński's statement on war losses, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 22.06.2007, <http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/1,114873,4244040.html>; (15.12.2011); English translation in: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1555189/Polish-PM-adopts-WW2-rhetoric-at-EU-summit.html>

⁵ Cf. Robert Traba: „Symbole pamięci: II wojna światowa w świadomości zbiorowej Polaków. Szkic do tematu”, in: Robert Traba: *Kraina tysiąca granic. Szkice o historii i pamięci*. Olsztyn 2003, p. 179-198.

⁶ Cf. *ibidem*. p. 181.

⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 188.

Soviet brotherhood of arms, the heroism of the Soviet Army, the commemoration of the Polish defensive war of 1939 (from the 1960s), and the commemoration of the resistance movement in the form of monuments of the People's Army (AL) and the People's Guard (GL) or, simply, the "partisans".⁸

As you can see, the memory of the Second World War during the times of the People's Republic of Poland (PRL) was largely monopolised by the state. Commemoration was allowed of only whatever fit the framework of the official political memory. That resulted in a whole range of taboo themes, so-called "blank spots" which included, primarily, the massacre of Polish officers in Katyn by the Soviet Secret Service (NKWD) in April and May 1940. According to the official version of the events, the Katyn massacre was attributed to Germans. Another taboo theme was the Soviet occupation of the eastern territories of Poland after the 17th September 1939 and the fates of Poles there, a number of whom were exiled in Siberia. Favouring the memory of the communist resistance movement, the PRL authorities were thus consigning to oblivion the history of the Polish Underground State and the Home Army (AK) which had been its armed organization. The Stalinist time in particular was a period of brutal repressions against former AK soldiers who were referred to as "spit-flecked reactionary dwarves" or fascists. Their memory was retained in family circles and amongst friends. A breakthrough came in 1956, together with the political changes and Władysław Gomułka coming to power, "when justice was done to both members of the Home Army and the September soldiers."⁹

Together with the emerging opposition in the PRL, the memory of Soviet occupation became a form of a certain memory opposing the official historical policy. An example were the activities of the underground Eastern Archives documenting the destinies of the Polish population from the territories occupied by the Red Army. The focus only on the martyrology of Polish victims of the war resulted in leaving out other groups of victims, mainly those belonging to the Jewish population.

After the fall of communism in Poland in 1989, the restraints of ideologised memory of World War II were rejected rather quickly. The abreaction to the communist manipulation of history manifested itself mainly through a wave of new historical symbolism which referred predominantly to the national heroes of the 2nd Republic of Poland and heroized the war fates of Poles and their suffering in the East.¹⁰

⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 190.

⁹ Jerzy Kochanowski: „Wrzesień (nie)pamiętany. Początek wojny w polskiej pamięci zbiorowej i polityce historycznej”, in: Błażej Brzostek/ Jerzy Eisler/ Dariusz Jarosz/ Krzysztof Kosiński/ Tadeusz Wolsza (eds.): *Niepiękny wiek XX*, Warszawa 2010, p.117-126, here p. 121.

¹⁰ Cf. Robert Traba: „Symbole pamięci...”, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

The time after 1989 was also marked by major social discussions in Poland which contributed to the pluralisation of the Polish memory of the Second World War. Two important debates need to be mentioned here:

1. The dispute over the forced resettlements of German people from so-called Regained Territories, that is former German territories assigned to Poland after the war as a consequence of the decisions made at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences. An essential element of that discussion, which was going on mainly in the press, was the problem of Polish involvement in depriving Germans of their homeland, which is very well illustrated by the title of the file which came out in 1997, issued by the Krakow publishing house "Znak", entitled: "Przeprosić za wypędzenie? (*Apologise for the expulsions?*)"¹¹ Many of the ideas discussed then reverberated after 2000, in the Polish-German conflict over the concept put forward by the German Federation of the Expelled (*Bund der Vertriebenen*) to build the Centre against Expulsions (*Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen*) in Berlin.
2. The attitude of Poles to the annihilation of their Jewish neighbours during German occupation. The dispute on that arose as a result of the publication in 2000 of the book by Jan Tomasz Gross "Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka" (*"Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland"*). Gross described in it the tragedy of the Jews from the town of Jedwabne, burnt on the 10th July 1941, in a barn, by their Polish neighbours. Briefly speaking, the public in Poland were divided into the supporters of Gross' thesis on the Polish guilt and those who referred to Germans as the causative agents. The investigation, which was opened on the 5th September 2000 by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), demonstrated that the perpetrators of the murder had been Polish residents of Jedwabne who, however, had acted upon German inspiration: "The involvement of Polish residents of the town of Jedwabne and its surroundings should be deemed proven, also in the light of the testimonies of the witnesses heard during the current investigation (...). The German inspiration to perpetrate the crime did not take (...) the form of accompliceship – joint perpetration of the planned crime with the Polish residents at all stages of implementation of the criminal plan. The criminal inspiration was to acquiesce in the crime and ensure the impunity of its perpetrators."¹² Another

¹¹ Cf. Klaus Bachmann/ Jerzy Kranz (ed): *Przeprosić za wypędzenie? O wysiedleniu Niemców po II wojnie światowej*. Kraków 1997.

¹² IPN, *Postanowienie z 30 czerwca 2003 r. o umorzeniu śledztwa w sprawie zabójstwa obywateli polskich narodowości żydowskiej w Jedwabnem w dniu 10 lipca 1941 r.*, p.198, <http://www.ipn.gov.pl/portal.php?serwis=pl&dzial=365&id=4642> (11.01.2012)

stage of the dispute followed with the next books by Gross: “Strach, Antysemityzm w Polsce tuż po wojnie. Historia moranej zapaści” (*Fear. Antisemitism in Poland after Auschwitz*) (Kraków 2008) and – written together with his wife Irena Gross – “Złote żniwa” (*Golden Harvest*) (Kraków 2011). The *Fear* was a description of the experience of Jewish Holocaust survivors returning to Poland. The *Golden Harvest*, in turn, addressed the problem of Poles taking over Jewish assets. Both publications divided the Polish public opinion even though the dispute was not as fierce as in the case of the *Neighbours*. It focused on the question of the proportions of the phenomena described by Gross against the background of well-known facts of numerous cases of help given to Jews by Polish society during the war. In other words, that was a question as to whether it was a “golden harvest” or “hearts of gold”, as the volume of studies edited by Marek Jan Chodkiewicz and Wojciech J. Muszyński put it¹³.

Leaving aside at this point the arguments, rightly put forward by historians, about methodological gaps in Gross’ research, it is to be concluded that the public debates that he triggered contributed largely to differentiating the memory of World War II oriented to date mainly at the Polish martyrology and to extending the same to include the suffering of primarily the Jewish neighbours. The dispute today is no longer about whether Poles murdered their Jewish neighbours in Jedwabne, but about the scale of this and other similar negative phenomena as compared with the entire society. The necessity to do further research is beyond dispute.

The Polish memory of World War II is at a breakthrough moment now. Soon, the generation of direct witnesses to those events will have been gone. This time of passage from communicative memory, oriented at day-to-day communication, towards institutionalised culture memory raises the question about the place of the Second World War in the memories of Poles who either have not witnessed themselves, or would not know direct witnesses to those events. The answer is not fully possible yet, but initiated in 2007, the project of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, to be a central place of commemoration of those times in Poland, enables the formulation of the first few conclusions.

The very dispute over the idea of the museum has shown that there are two concepts of the narrative of the Second World War: a historical narrative oriented at Polish martyrology, and a concept of telling the story in the context of the whole Europe’s experience. The debate on the

¹³ Marek J. Chodkiewicz/ Wojciech J. Muszyński (eds.): *Złote serca czy złote żniwa? Studia nad wojennymi losami Polaków i Żydów*. Warszawa 2011.

concept of the museum was also, to a degree, a reflection of the dispute, which has been under way since the coming into power in 2005 of the nationalist/conservative party “Law and Justice” (PiS), over so-called “historical policy”. It was the idea of the Federation of the Expelled to set up in Berlin the Centre against Expulsions that raised rightful concerns in Poland about relativisation of the history of World War II and caused a partial return to the martyrological dispute. Such re-nationalisation of the memory of the Second World War and its translation into the concept of a museum would be, in my view, too short-sighted because in this case the Polish experience of the war should be told against European background showing the fates of other nations too. Only such a language will be understood by future generations living in an increasingly globalised world. This will also be a chance for Europeans to understand the specifically Polish experience of occupation and extermination during World War II. Such is the idea of the authors of the museum too which is scheduled to be opened in 2013. Its aims and tasks are set as follows:

“The Museum of the Second World War will remind people about the tragic events in which countless people from the most remote corners of the Earth lost their lives. But it will be devoted not only to the history of the infernal crimes, which must be documented and commemorated. Most importantly, we want to make current and future generations aware that there were people who – even at that time of immeasurable disdain for life – were capable of preserving what was most valuable: their dignity. We thus want the young person, as he or she leaves our Museum, to believe that it is worth being decent – like Cavalry Captain Witold Pilecki, Father Maksymilian Maria Kolbe, Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Captain Wilm Hosenfeld, Irena Sendler, General Elżbieta Zawacka “Zo” and thousands of Righteous among the Nations.”¹⁴

¹⁴ <http://www.muzeum1939.pl/?str=5&id=8> (11.01.2012)