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Postmemory of the Holocaust in modern research

Postpamięć Zagłady we współczesnych badaniach

Abstract

This paper describes the Holocaust in modern research. The principal works in the context of heritage trauma were penned by Barbara Engelking (*Holocaust and Memory: The Experience of the Holocaust and Its Consequences: An Investigation Based on Personal Narratives*) and Marianne Hirsh (*Żałoba i postpamięć* [*Mourning and Postmemory*]). Their analyses show how different were the attitudes taken by people who survived the Holocaust. I have completed my work with other research, focusing on the literature discussing psychological and political aspects. The aim was to show the diversity of the effects produced by the Holocaust and its unfading resonance in various areas of life.

Where the intergenerational ties are broken and the cultural transmission gets disrupted, a new kind of memory emerges, related to both collective and individual cultural memory. The Holocaust, which eradicated ancestors almost in their entirety, deprived the younger generation of the opportunity to build their identity on a model that had been passed down for centuries. The loss of older generations made it impossible to draw upon the identity ingrained in the generation of grandparents or grand-grandparents. According to Margaret Mead, who has distinguished the con-figurative, post-figurative, and pre-figurative models of culture (Mead 1978: 19), Jewish culture had been based on a traditional, multigenerational family model, with the authority accorded to the ancestors. As such, it was classed as a post-figurative culture. The Holocaust upturned this order, and the future generations inherited, in a way, the wartime trauma, becoming its "heirs":

> In the literature on the subject, a great deal is written about 'inheritance' of war-time burdens, and attention is drawn to the fact that the children of Holocaust survivors require the services of psychoanalysts. This has led to many interpretations and various systems of classification of mechanisms for inter-generational communication in survivors' families. It can happen that the parents, absorbed in their own suffering, concentrated on the past, are unable to take an interest in the life that their own children are living. It can happen that the problems of the children are made light of – since in comparison with the problems that they themselves faced during the war, the problems of their children seem entirely unimportant (Engelking 1994: 264–265)[1].

This paper aims to trace the phenomenon of postmemory spurred by the powerful trauma of the Holocaust and passed on to later generations in the context of relevant research in the field.

Tomasz Łysak, the editor of *Antologia studiów nad traumą* [*An Anthology of Studies of Trauma*] has emphasised an increased and interdisciplinary interest in trauma, observed since the last years of the 20th century. The topic is discussed in the context of both literary, cultural, and historiographical studies, but intensive research into the traumatised has also been conducted by psychoanalysts. Łysak refers to a wide array of expert theories (Łysak 2015: 15–16). One of them is proposed by Allen Meek, who distinguishes three categories: traumatic image, structural trauma and historical trauma. The first one refers to wounds (physical or psychological), the second one – to the delayed recognition of the weight of the event, and the last one, – the historical trauma – to the disrupted forms of identity which, repeated in images or narratives, demand continued negotiations and "working through" (Meek 2010: 31–32).

However, "working through" is not always an option. Dominick LaCapra has observed that some individuals remain "possessed or haunted by the past". He offers the example of the work of Charlotte Delbo, who rejects narrative coherence and focuses on the posttraumatic character of her writings, which she considers an act of fidelity towards the victims of the Shoah (LaCapra 2015: 91).

Secondary witnesses – survivors' children – can inherit the anxiety and trauma through indirect experience. However, their anxiety and trauma may be made light of:

> There is at times a tendency in certain contemporary approaches to eliminate or obscure the role of problematic intermediary or transitional processes [...]. In this formulation, the repetition compulsion sets limits to the fantasy of total

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[1] Translator's note: All quotations from "Holocaust and Memory" provided as in the official English edition translated by Emma Harris (Leicester University Press, 2001).

mastery, but there is no indication of forms of working-through that check, or generate counterforces to, compulsive repetition but are not tantamount to total mastery or definitive closure (LaCapra 2015: 91–92)[2].

Barbara Engelking notes that the generation "burdened" with the Holocaust was forcefully urged to spare their parents any additional trouble, as they were already afflicted by their tragic experience. As a result, the children developed ambivalent feelings towards their parents. The inhibited aggression and difficulty in clearly defining their own identity became an obstacle in establishing interpersonal relations and a reason for seeking psychotherapy (Engelking 2014: 265).

Yael Danieli suggested categorisation of the survivors' families (Danieli 1985: 34), which Engelking enriched with the findings of her own research, focusing on the relations of the second generation and their parents. Post-war marriages were often founded on trauma bonding. Yael Danieli calls them "the marriages of despair" (ibid.: 34). These couples ignored differences in descent, education or lifestyle. What held them together was the traumatic experience of war and the new family was supposed to compensate them for their suffering and losses.

The first model proposed by Danieli concerns the "victim families". In this model, the parents were constantly fraught by the feelings of sorrow, distrust, helplessness and fear. They had difficulty in making choices, as they viewed every decision as a matter of life and death. Besides, they were overprotective of their children, whom they kept under strict control:

> In families like this, the children played the part of intermediaries both between their anxious parents and the outside world, and also within the household, between parents who complained about each other and were full of pretensions and mutual disillusion. 'Victims' families' deny the existence of psychological problems connected with wartime experiences. To admit them would be seen as a posthumous victory for Hitler (Engelking 1994: 266).

Danieli defines the second model as the "fighter families". The parents in these families tended to actively resist the Nazis by participating in a ghetto uprising or joining a guerrilla unit. They were active, task-oriented, and relentless in the pursuit of their goal. At home, they did not accept any "self-pity" or showing weakness. The problems of their children were viewed dismissively; the offspring were required to exhibit their independence. Children brought

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[2] Translator's note: Quoted as in the original English edition ("Critical Inquiry", Vol. 25, No. 4, Summer 1999).

up in such families experienced difficulty in forming bonds with others and sharing responsibility.

The next category distinguished by Danieli are the "numb families". In this case, the married couples lost all their families, sometimes including former spouses and children, during the war. They were the only survivors. These families were struck by poignant silence and all emotions were squelched (both the positive and the difficult ones). The parents, focused intensely on their past, could not free themselves of their memories. Their behaviour was incomprehensible to their children, forced to suppress their feelings. This model also made the children meet the expectations of their parents, which involved taking care of each other and appreciating the parents for handling their financial situation. As in the previous models, survivors' children in these families had difficulty forming happy, stable relationships, as they expected their partners to provide them with parental care (ibid.: 266–267).

The last model distinguished by the researcher are the so-called families of "those who made it". Since the parents witnessed the war as teenagers, they were too young to rush into "marriages of despair" in the post-war period. They did not share a similar past with their partners. However, in their relationships, it was the survivor who played the dominating role. The survivor's plans and ambitions became a priority, and other family members had to come into line. The emotions and needs of the children were slighted, as the parents focused mainly on their achievements. The past, which was the source of trauma, was left hidden deep underneath, and the later generations often learnt the truth by accident or indirectly (ibid.: 267).

The taxonomy suggested by Danieli is not aimed at providing an unequivocal categorisation of families but rather points to the variety of possible reactions and life stances in the wake of the Shoah.

As the descendants of the survivors slowly started to uncover the truth and understand the actions and behaviours of their parents, there emerged a need to give the floor to them – the generation which inherited the truth of their background, oftentimes concealed for long years. One of such people was Marianne Hirsch, who carried out scientific research into the experience and reactions of the "heirs", which she referred to as postmemory.

Having introduced "postmemory" as a term, Marianne Hirsh reserves that she approaches it with a dose of scepticism. She wonders if the prefix "post" is not too powerful in suggesting that the matter at hand is already beyond the realm of memory. The researcher gives a detailed explanation of her understanding of postmemory and its differences from memory and history:

In my reading, postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth (Hirsch 2010: 254)[3].

Hirsh notes that while the term refers to the Holocaust, or to be exact – the children who survived the Holocaust, it may be used also in the context of other mass experiences of traumatic nature (ibid.: 254). The author of *Żałoba i post--pamięć* [*Mourning and Postmemory*] prefers her term to the "absent memory" or a "memory hole". In her book, postmemory contains both fullness and void, and does not differ from memory in its structure.

The goal of postmemory in the broad sense is to join. This refers to establishing links between one's own identity and the experience of one's ancestors, merging the intergenerational experience, and mitigating or eliminating the distance between the present and the tragic past (*Modi memorandi* 2014: 390)[4].

Anna Mach, author of the book *Świadkowie świadectw. Postpamięć Zagłady w polskiej literaturze najnowszej* [*Witnessing the Testimonies. Postmemory of the Holocaust in Contemporary Polish Literature*], emphasises that the research interests of Marianne Hirsch, revolving around the intergenerational inheritance of trauma, are partly related to her background, as the author belongs to the generation of the "heirs" herself. In postmemory, the fundamental aspect is identification – the act of identifying with the participants of traumatic events while keeping your distance (Mach 2016: 86). Mach explains why postmemory should not be equated with collective or cultural memory[5]. The difference refers not only to the aforementioned distance but also to the scarcity of research into the memory about the Shoah in the first decades after the war. This explains the

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[3] Translator's note: quoted as in the original English version (Harvard University Press, 1997).

[4] It is worth adding that postmemory is not limited to the ancestors' experience of the Holocaust, in line with the assumptions made by Marianne Hirsh. The term has found a broader application in the framework of research into identity. It is often used by sociologists, historians and researchers into the anthropology of culture, and others. See: K. Kaniowska, entry *Postpamięć* [*Postmemory*] (*Modi memorandi* 2014: 390).

[5] Frank Ankersmit provides a thesis that clashes somewhat with the observations of Anna Mach: "All the aforementioned [...] properties and circumstances relating to postmemory allow to use this term in the studies on both the individual and collective memory/identity. The first perspective remains in line with Hirsch's intentions. The other has appeared in the course of various attempts at applying the term in individual studies (i.e. in research practice) in the fields of anthropology or history" (Ankersmit 2004).

need for contemporary research, which fills the void and attempts to re-establish communication. Hirsch emphasises that the goal of this communication is not to mindlessly brood or let tragic events cast a long shadow on the present:

> As explained by Marianne Hirsch, the prefix "post" in "postmemory" refers primarily to the "delay", or the post-factum impact typical for trauma, but also to that which precedes it, in the likeness of "posts" in the terms such as postmodernism, postcolonialism, postsecularism, etc. At the same time, the relation between postmemory and the past is not mediated by remembering past experiences (like in the case of "simple" memory), but by the "imaginative investment, projection, creation". [....] Traumatic identification with the fate of another can go hand-in-hand with the creation of an imaginary false identification (ibid.: 87–88)[6].

Similar observations were also made by Geoffrey Hartman who warns against excessive identification with the victims as it could lead to traumatisation. In Hartman's book, empathy should be combined with an intellectual approach (Hartman 1996; *Modi memorandi* 2014: 476).

According to Mach, postmemory is close to the psychoanalytical concept of Freud. The generation of survivors is trying to confront the events their ancestors were unable to absorb and comprehend. The process takes place not only on behalf of the witnesses and in their place, but also against their silence. The generation of "heirs" unveils and enriches the stories of their parents (Mach 2016: 88).

Some interesting concepts on the psychological aspect of verbal communications were proposed by Jarosław Rokicki. The truth of the so-called bare facts proves less important than the emotional layer which allows the identity to be revealed:

> What matters is not the factually correct representation of what happened. The point is that when people speak of their experiences, they probe the past in a very personal and emotional manner. They search for the foundations of their own identity, for the sources of their dignity-related stances, justifications for the choice of their path in life, meanings, and the sense of the surrounding world and their actions. Beyond a doubt, they are authentic and, in their own way, sincere in this search (Rokicki 2011: 28).

The lack of a scientific description of the Holocaust trauma after World War Two is not only the consequence of the silence (or convoluted, allusive statements) of the survivors. Those who came to the help of the Jews during

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[6] Translator's note: the quotes are the product of own translation, unless stated otherwise.

persecutions also kept silent – out of fear. Their experience is described by Jan Gross, whose research into post-war relationships between Poles and Jews is inspired by the words of Miriam Hochberg-Mariańska: "I don't know if any man living outside Poland could grasp and comprehend that an act of saving the life of a hunted person, of an innocent child, from the hands of a criminal, could put the rescuers in trouble or bring them shame". Gross offers examples of individual people (names and surnames revealed) who concealed their involvement in helping the Jews. The researcher often presents many "Righteous Among the Nations" in an unfavourable light[7]. However, there are some (rare) examples of justifications for their fully warranted fear. For instance, Gross relates the tragic fortunes of Antonina Wyrzykowska:

> For her whole life, Antosia Wyrzykowska with her family bore the consequences of the simple impulse to help those in need, which she developed as a result of her ardent Catholic faith. First, straight after the liberation, the local guerrilla learnt that Wyrzykowska had been harbouring Jews and came to kill them. When she refused to reveal their location, the guerrilla men beat her so hard that every piece of her body turned blue. [...] After some time, she met her oppressors in Bielsk Podlaski. Yet again, they started to threaten her, and the family had to move once more (Gross 2008: 16–17)[8].

As I already noted, Anna Mach describes the problem of trauma with reference to Freud's psychoanalysis. According to Freud, the psyche of a trauma-affected person opposes that from which it should benefit. The emergence of trauma is deferred in time. In turn, Cathy Caruth refers to the tragic, legendary heroes – Tancredi and Clorinda[9]. She emphasises that trauma involves

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[7] When describing the attitudes of people who rescued the Jews during the war, Gross does not take a particularly sympathetic view. In many fragments, *Fear...* cannot be regarded as a comprehensive, objective publication which investigates the reasons for specific behaviour. For example, the author writes that many Jewish children, separated from their parents or relatives who survived the war, never reunited with their families. This dramatic situation supposedly continued because the new caretakers either did not want to give back the children or demanded a sizeable fee. Thus, the children were robbed of their true identity and the discovery of their Jewish origin filled them with fear. The researcher is critical towards the reluctance to reveal the truth about rescuing the Jews, using bold words to describe the recipients of the title Righteous Among the Nations: "Isn't it absurd that the same people who are now venerated as Righteous Among the Nations feared to reveal what they did after the war? I have read many memoirs of the rescued Jews and it turned out that the rescuers often asked to remain anonymous" (Gross 2008: 11–12).

[8] For more on the ambivalence of this phenomenon, see: Jacek Leociak (2018).

[9] In the poem *Jerusalem Delivered* written by Torquato Tasso in 1581, Tancredi, a Christian knight, kills his beloved Clorinda, a Saracen woman, because he does not know with whom he is fighting.

not only a "delay" but also a readiness to take responsibility for the suffering of another. According to Mach, the concept of Caruth becomes especially important for the description of the Shoah-related trauma ingrained directly in postmemory. The researcher brings up also another one of Freud's concepts (consistent with the observations of Assman) – that the past is important for the community only as long as it undergoes reactualisation. And reactualisation inevitably entails the risk of distortion[10].

According to Mach, the conclusions from research conducted by Freud and Caruth may be related to the experience of historical trauma, related to concealment and "blank spots" of memory.

The reluctance to speak of the difficult experience of the Holocaust is also discussed by Barbara Engelking. The author of "Holocaust and Memory" evokes the theses of Primo Levi[11] that the reason for hiding the painful truth was not only fear, but often also guilt:

> For many survivors, the past is an enormous burden. Memory is a cause of suffering. They often, therefore, try to escape from memories, to forget, push away, ignore or deny their own experiences. Primo Levi links the reluctance to talk with the survivors' sense of guilt, which stems from their passivity and inability to act, and which appeared when they returned to "normal" life (Levi 1966: 14–15; Engelking 1994: 284).

Victims started to feel shame as they realised that their involvement in the defiance against the oppressors was too small. People who lived through hell rebuked themselves for their failure to engage in the insurgent movements. Their shame was combined with a feeling of guilt experienced by virtually every survivor:

> Almost all of them felt guilty that they had not helped others when there was always someone alongside in a worse situation than their own. In the camps, however, there had been no time, or patience, or strength even to listen to others; the precondition for survival had been to think exclusively of yourself (Engelking 1994: 284).

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[10] Freud made changes in the five books of Moses and the Book of Joshua. It turned out that the important alterations and omissions, significantly distorting the content, were not difficult to spot. The researcher argued that analogous changes apply to dreams. See: Mach (2016: 66–67).

[11] Primo Levi (1919–1987), Italian writer and chemist of Jewish descent, the author of shocking testimonies published in his autobiographical books such as: *If This Is a Man* (originally published in 1947), and *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986) – a philosophical study on the causes of human demeanor in the face of death and inhuman treatment in concentration camps.

Those who lived tried to escape the wartime trauma and memories. Engelking interviewed many survivors. One of them claimed that he had shut the door to the past in a sort of a "defence mechanism" (ibid.: 283).

In her broad account on the issue of post-war trauma, Engelking also discusses the rather malignant consequences of that "defence" mechanism. The block resulted in frequently recurring nightmares and anxiety, which only added to the difficulty in confronting the tragic experience, creating a vicious circle.

Another reason for hiding the truth was also fear-related. It concerned the lack of understanding[12]. The survivors chose silence also because of tactless, inappropriate questions. Facing a lack of empathy definitely did not help them open up about their painful experience. The fear of the lack of understanding could be compounded by the fear of dismissive treatment:

> Many survivors are greatly afraid of passing judgement - something that is inevitable when they talk about it - on people whom they are talking about, events, other people's motivations and behaviour. The survivors fear that a change in the hierarchy of values, the wartime 'switched off morality', may be completely incomprehensible and unacceptable to those who did not live through the same experience. They are afraid of judgement being passed on their own and other people's behaviour according to the moral categories of peace-time (ibid.: 287–288)[13].

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[12] It is worth noting that in modern times, with the advancements of technology, we have witnessed the "Disneylandisation of heritage". In her article *Turyści horroru w miejscach pamięci…* [*Tourists of Horror at the Sites of Memory*], Magdalena Hodalska analyses the controversial behaviours observed, among others, at the Auschwitz Museum. "In July 2014, an American teenager Breanna Mitchel, who introduces herself as Princess Breanna, posted an Auschwitz selfie with a smiling and blushing emoticon on her Twitter profile. Social media went ablaze, and the one-season celebrity started receiving mail threats. She explained that the selfie was supposed to celebrate the memory of her father who had promised to take her to Auschwitz but died, and that she was not sorry because 'she did nothing wrong'. Gemma Blackwood observes that a narcissist photo confuses two vastly different cultural codes. The first one encompasses the humorous modes of auto-presentation in social media; the other requires us to behave at the historical sites of memory with tact, as well as an air of solemnity and respect for the blood which was shed there. It seems that Princess Breanna was familiar only with the first code, and poorly. Internet users could accept her ludicrous moves at the Roman Colosseum, which is a symbol of an ancient civilisation, but a concentration camp is a sacred space where the visitors should weep, learn the truth, start thinking, and remember" (Blackwood 2014; Hodalska 2015: 601–602).

[13] Engelking refers to the words of Lawrence Langer, a psychologist who investigated the Shoah. Langer has drawn a conclusion that the victims inhabit two worlds which can never reach harmony. "It is for this reason that some of the survivors live in the past, bury themselves in it and judge today's world in the moral categories of those times. Others, on the contrary, try to break away from the past and its ethical principles. Translating the moral categories of the ghetto into the language of peace-time ethics is both unrealistic and senseless" (Langer 1991: 80, quoted as in: "Holocaust and Memory", Barbara Engelking).

The victims also kept silent as they were unable to forgive and needed revenge. Engelking does not cover this problem in detail but does offer a handful of remarks. The willingness to punish the guilty for the atrocious suffering seems natural. Apart from talking to the victims, the researcher analysed texts penned in the ghettoes. Many a time, those writings were filled with helplessness and hate for the oppressors. It turned out that, however intense, these feelings did not grow with time but abated. Yet the realisation of the senselessness of revenge, which would fail to bring back the dead and relieve pain, did not invite a full reconciliation with the past and forgiveness:

> Years later, hatred dies out, pales, loses pace. You cannot feel such a strong emotion over a long period because it is too exhausting psychologically, too much of a drain on your energy. You cannot hate endlessly - that kind of emotion is destructive, not only for those against whom it is directed, but also for the person who feels it. [...] The desire for revenge perhaps also disappears because the Holocaust survivors know that no revenge can put back the clock and prevent what happened from having happened, cannot bring the dead back to life. It would not therefore bring satisfaction, or even healing. This does not make despair less terrible. [...] Hatred pales, even though you cannot forget. But is forgiveness possible? This is a very difficult, individual problem, touching on the wounded spirits of the survivors. You cannot enforce anything here, forgiveness or waiving guilt is a particular process which for some is absolutely inconceivable (ibid.: 291–292).

The reasons for silence and the "blank spots" of memory mentioned by Marianne Hirsch and Anna Mach are intricate and subject to their own dynamics. After the years, some survivors dared to take the floor and voice their painful truth loud and clear. The shifts in both values and awareness that must have pushed them to this decision are also the subject of Engelking's writings.

The pain of memories paled with the passage of time. Daily life could be soothing. Sometimes, it allowed the victims to look at their tragic experiences from a distance. However, that is not to say that they were able to forget. The past kept coming back, often resurfacing in dreams. The researcher asserted that the survivors involuntarily functioned in two parallel worlds:

> The survivors, who function in two worlds − one from fifty years ago, and the present day − live [...] in a permanent conflict of the past and the present. It can happen that the two worlds intermingle: some stimulus can call up an avalanche of connections and related behaviour. This takes place completely involuntarily, independently of human will (ibid.: 293).

Living entangled in two worlds is an arduous task. Hiding the truth also becomes more and more difficult. Engelking also points to the natural human tendency observed in people nearing the end of their lives. It concerns settling with the past. Therefore, the confession of having experienced trauma was spurred by the processes of both physical (aging) and psychological nature. The necessary factor was also the presence of a person asking about the painful experience and listen. The decisions to reveal the truth resulted in a flurry of Holocaust memoirs which appeared in Poland in the 1990s and the 2000s.

According to Primo Levi, people resolved to tell the truth because for those who survived the war, it became the central element of their lives. Not least because of the fact that it dreadfully intruded upon their daily life and irreparably ruined their most beautiful time – their youth. Similar conclusions are reached by Barbara Engelking who has analysed the statements made by the Survivors:

> An important element of my conversations with survivors was also the fact that these were elderly people talking about their youth. After all, accounts of this kind have rules of their own: youth is always a beautiful period and is made more beautiful in the retelling. But the threat of wartime experiences destroyed any kind of beauty in the accounts of their youth given by the people I interviewed (ibid.: 295)[14].

As they discerned that future generations will not learn from the past, the survivors succumbed to pessimism. Wars and genocides will not stop. So was their suffering in vain? If their tragedy contributed to the betterment of the world, even in the smallest of ways, the reconciliation with the vicissitudes of fate would be easier. Engelking mentions also a flicker of hope:

> The feeling of the uselessness of the great burden of suffering that fell to their lot is painful for many. But there is also a belief that the time will come when the experience of the Holocaust, lived through and thought over, will change something in man. However, perhaps it is still too early for this (ibid.: 297).

The survivors often tried to engage in pacifist actions opposing racial discrimination of their own initiative. The author of "Holocaust and Memory" writes that the Shoah was an uprooting revolution which destroyed time

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[14] While describing the issue of memory and identity, Aleida Assman recalls the theses of philosophers such as Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, which also refer to trauma: "Nietzsche believes that the solution to the problem lies in the violent practices of cultural 'mnemonic techniques'. 'If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases hurting stays in the memory'" (Assman 2013: 148).

and ruptured the ties between the past, the present, and the future. The victims pondered over the sense of the Holocaust, looking for a way to rebuild what was lost (ibid.: 233).

Discussing the legacy of the Holocaust, Engelking declares it an experience that cannot be incorporated into the framework of codes by culture, but only by an individual. Many times, the researcher emphasises that the Holocaust can be communicated at an individual level only, never at the collective level, as it refers to individual experience and sensitivity. She makes the apt observation on the inclusion of the Shoah into the cultural legacy, or the transformation of the memory of the Shoah into a social experience. Engelking believes we should ruminate on how to remember "that" experience. It would be preferable not to turn the memory of the Holocaust into a source of intolerance. One can also ask whether the knowledge of this experience will disappear as the last survivors pass away. The author believes that the answer to this question is partly affirmative. However, the resulting void may become a space for communication using fuller, more distanced symbolism. For the later generations, the experience of the Holocaust is an obligation – an extremely difficult one due to the technological progress, which mitigates the barriers but also turns human suffering into something common:

> The experience of the Holocaust seems to me to lay an obligation on us all. An obligation which is paid off individually, on the basis of recognizing that particular event in the history of mankind as part of our own heritage. [...] With the shrinking of the world has come an increase in the distances between people, and a decline in sensitivity to other people's suffering. (ibid.: 302–303)[15].

Engelking concludes her musings with the conjecture that, in a yet undetermined time frame, the Shoah will become a part of the cultural language of symbols (ibid.: 303)[16]. But the preservation of memory on the Holocaust depends not only on the cultural dimension. The political aspect is of importance as well. Daniel Levy (German sociologist and political scientist) and Natan Sznaider (an Israeli sociologist born in a family of Polish Jews) present the political relations related to the Jewish question in Israel and Germany and

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[15] Important observations on the role of the witness have been proposed by Magdalena Marszałek who argues that many witnesses who simultaneously found themselves in the position of victims displayed an almost biological impulse to give testimony (*Modi memorandi* 2014: 476).

[16] Despite numerous studies, scientific publications, or movies touching upon the topic of the Shoah, some still say that it never got a satisfactory explanation. According to L. Langer, some shortcomings can be observed in both publications of the historians and narratives of the survivors (Langer 1991; *Modi memorandi* 2014: 538).

shed a light on the mutual relations between these countries in the context of the Shoah, revealing their incoherence in all three areas. The discrepancies stem mostly from the differences in the concepts of various political parties. The attitude to the past is complicated and fails to provide a proper way to preserve the memory of the violent past:

> Intentions vary and overlap with – or oppose – various political motivations. However, each time they lead to ousting memory from the historical and national era. Besides, the incessant debate on the memory of the Holocaust has contributed to the public reflection on the identity-forming value of collective memory. […] The essence of historical discernments was quickly dominated by the metahistorical discourse also in Israel. As a result, the national history was increasingly questioned and became a bone of contention in the policy on memory (Levy, Sznaider 2014: 169–170)[17].

The memory of the Holocaust is inextricably political, and the political aspect has a strong impact on identity formation. Geoffrey Hartman emphasises that all "mechanisms of remembrance", i.e. the artefacts described as the "statues of memory", serve to relieve the memory and free the people from the burdens of the past. At the same time, they are indispensable for a deep reflection on past atrocities (Hartman 1996; *Modi memorandi* 2014: 542). Clearly, an accurate description of the Holocaust is difficult and depends on a variety of factors. Especially as it touches upon a myriad of important spheres of life – from the intimate, private, often hidden memories to loud discussions (and conflicts) in the international arena.

The experience of the Holocaust stays with the victims forever. Seul Friedlander notes that those who survived and built new lives for themselves and started families, usually reminisce in a closed circle with those who shared their fate. Regardless of whether they prefer to give a testimony of their experience or choose silence, the years of fighting for life will remain the central time of their existence:

> Recurrently, it pulled them back into overwhelming terror and, throughout, notwithstanding the passage of time, it carried along with it the indelible memory of the dead (Sawicki online)[18].

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[17] It is also interesting to note the commentary of the authors on the controversial exhibition at the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn. The disputes were sparked by the presentation of Nazism in both facilities (Levy, Sznaider 2014: 170).

[18] Translator's note: Quoted as in the original English edition: https://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2015/2015-apr-jun/special-issue-contemporary-art-and-memory-part-2/sawicki-saul-friedlaender-en [accessed: 18.06.2020].

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