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Memory of the Holocaust in Henryk Grynberg's volume of poetry *Dowód osobisty* [*Personal ID*]¹

Pamięć Zagłady w tomie poezji Henryka Grynberga *Dowód osobisty*

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Abstract

Virtually all of Henryk Grynberg's work is devoted to the subject of the Holocaust. In the 2006 volume entitled *Dowód osobisty*, individual poems require not only knowledge of the Shoah but also of the author's biography and other work. In many, the lyrical subject is endowed with the poet's own characteristics. Another modality of presenting the world—one seldom employed in poetry—is through the utterance of a collective subject (the lyrical “us”, which may be identified with the Jewish nation), in which the focus shift from the personal, individual experience to a more general and objective scope. Also, numerous poems feature indirect allusions to Grynberg's earlier work. Hence, their interpretation is contingent on the reader's literary experience.

The main thematic line of Henryk Grynberg's oeuvre is aptly described by the title of the first book concerned with his writings, Dorota Krawczyńska's monograph entitled *Własna historia Holokaustu* [*Holocaust's Own History*] (Krawczyńska 2005). On the one hand, the prose and lyric poetry of the author of *Żydowska wojna* [*The Jewish War*] are subordinated to the inner need to bear witness to the Holocaust,

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while on the other, they possess a somewhat didactic dimension, demonstrating that anti-Semitism did not disappear as the Second World War came to an end and that the tragedy of the Shoah may repeat at any moment.² This is a very “bitter” form of didacticism, which stems from belonging to a nation that was condemned to non-existence in its entirety. At the same time, the ubiquitous element in Grynberg’s works, namely the memory of the Holocaust, displays a twofold/dual nature, being both individual-personal (the loss of the immediate family) and national-social (the annihilation of the Jewish people). In the light of that work, the author/lyrical subject/narrator—spared from that hell—seems a great loner, while his solitude is not the result of any choice but a fate of sorts. Already as a child, he was deprived by that very fate of a future, “normal” life and doomed to experience this dearth forever. To a fair extent, it is that peculiar “abandonment” which nurtures the need to constantly recall and uphold the memory of the Holocaust as well as to justify his own existence on top of that. These issues have been present in Grynberg’s poetry from the outset, when the volume *Święto Kamieni* [*The Holiday of Stones*] was published in 1964. That collection includes the poem *Zostało we mnie* [*It Has Stayed With Me*]:

I was six years old
 the wind
 brought half-burnt sheets of paper from behind the wall
 that no one could read anymore
 they
 are the marks on the unburned paper
 I found

it has stayed with me to this day
 that I do not try to collect
 the stones scattered on the roads
 stones

from which mounds could be raised
 of a much more lasting existence

because I know
 how little a mummy has in common
 with the pyramid that was made to bear it
 by people with congenital want of proportion
 which I also lack today

and I have so few peers (Grynberg 2000: 5)

² See e.g. remarks in Chapter Two of Sławomir Buryła’s *Opisać Zagładę. Holocaust w twórczości Henryka Grynberga* (Buryła 2006: 63–129).

The title of the poem—especially seen separately from its substance—may indicate that it concerns a recollection/remembrance of a past event that left a powerful mark on the mind of the lyrical self. The phrase “has stayed with me” suggests a permanent “presence” of this event in the speaker’s consciousness.

The first line already specifies that an event from childhood is involved—the sight of partly burnt pieces of paper carried by the wind “from behind the wall”. The words describing the origin of these pieces of paper (“from behind the wall”) become thoroughly clear when one considers the author’s biography and draw on the annihilation of the Warsaw Ghetto (the so-called Grossaktion, or Great Action, during which most persons living in the closed-off Jewish quarter were sent to the death camp in Treblinka and murdered there, lasted from July to September 1942³, i.e. exactly at the time when Grynberg, born in July 1936, turned six). We are therefore dealing here with a subject who, following Ryszard Nycz, may be called sylleptic. It combines elements of artistic creation and extra-textual reality (the author’s biography) into a coherent (textualized) whole. Any attempt by the reader to decide whether any elements of the world told by such a subject are “truthful/authentic” will be arbitrary and, in this sense, bound to fail.⁴

However, let us return to the poem.

The lyrical self identifies the observed phenomenon (the burnt, illegible sheets of paper) with the people (Jews) dying behind the wall. It is difficult to

³ Concerning Grossaktion and the annihilation of the Warsaw Ghetto, see e.g. Bartoszewski, Edelman 2010: 70–104. It is recalled from the perspective of a child by Michał Głowiński (Głowiński 2002; the time spent in the ghetto is described in the five initial chapters).

⁴ The term was coined in the wake of a peculiar rhetorical turn in the humanities in the final decades of the 20th century (besides literary studies, rhetorical terminology also began to be employed by theory and history of art). Although one may have reservations about its metaphorical character (since it describes the situation of the subjective self by analogy to a rhetorical device), it has become a permanent feature of literary discourse. Nycz describes this type of subjectivity as follows: “The sylleptic self—to put it in the simplest of terms—is a self which has to be construed in two different ways simultaneously: namely as real and as made-up, as empirical and as textual, as actual and as fictional” (Nycz 1994: 22). In extreme cases, the narrator or the protagonist of the work is equipped with personal traits of the author, resulting in “the author’s bold entry into the text as the protagonist of a story which is henceforth no longer entirely fictional” (Nycz 1994: 22). On this conception of subjectivity, see also e.g. Winiecka 2004: 137–157. See also comments on Winiecka’s notion of the sylleptic subject (expounded in the monograph *Białoszewski sylleptyczny* – Winiecka 2006) in Piotr Sobolczyk’s review (Sobolczyk 2007). Sobolczyk’s advances a highly interesting observation, stating that “ideal syllepticity, [. . .], occurs when we do not know Miron Białoszewski or Leszek Soliński personally, but we know that their existence has been attested not only by Białoszewski’s work, or else we trust that the author makes such an assertion; however, it is not in evidence when, reading Białoszewski (or, say, Konwicki), we come across the Palace of Culture and Science, the edifice which we have seen on a walk or in television, as have very many other people.” (Sobolczyk 2007: 118).

state conclusively whether this identification took place in the past described in the opening verses or whether it occurred later (the verb “I found” merely situates it in the period preceding the utterance). In a way, this act is the moment when a particular language is established because it creates a symbolic (or, in fact, metonymic) relationship between the object and the person (between the sign and the designatum). By virtue of identification, the inability to decipher the charred sheets is transposed onto the people behind the wall as well. Nothing can be said about them either, so they remain in the realm of the unspoken (which, in the realities of the poetic of the poem should also be associated with their being behind the wall).⁵

The eponymous phrase relating to memory is articulated yet again by the poem’s self at the beginning of the second stanza. In that context, it turns out to refer not so much to memory as such but to the experience/learning rooted in what the child went through. Remembered from the war, the sight of the floating sheets of paper made the lyrical self realize the insignificance of human existence. It is most vividly evinced in the final verse mentioning the scarcity of peers. In this, the lyrical subject shares the experience of Grynberg himself, whose peers became victims of the Holocaust.

The strategy of creating the subject employed in *Zostało we mnie* continues in Grynberg’s subsequent volumes of poetry. Grynberg’s most recent *Dowód osobisty [Personal ID]* (Grynberg 2006), published by Biuro Literackie, is no different in that respect. It includes at least several poems which, without the biographical or even bio-bibliographical background of the author, may be read differently than when that context is taken into account. For a start, let us consider the poem *Nasza wina [Our Fault]*:

Through us they remember everything
they have done

and they lose the bidding of who has done more
good or evil

so they blame us for the crimes
that they commit

⁵ This juxtaposition (which compares the people dying behind the wall to the now illegible, half-charred pieces of paper), may be argued to draw on the image of human life as a written book (the book motif still functions in sepulchral sculpture). The impossibility of reading the floating pages would thus denote the namelessness of the dying, whose life and tragedy will forever remain anonymous and undescribed.

and the greater the crime
the greater the fault

they blame us because we are due to their fault
they blame us because we are their fault

they blame us because we have been around longer
than they shall

because we are (Grynberg 2006: 23)

Detached from its biographical context, the text of the piece is hardly comprehensible and may thus be read along the lines of the universal juxtaposition which confronts “us” and “them” or, for instance, as an expression of political antagonisms (such interpretations were advanced by a group of Polish Studies students in Siedlce after they examined the poem without any additional information about the author or the relevant historical context).

Even in such a vaguely delineated world, one notices certain features which are common to various readings. First of all, the poem's reality is presented from the standpoint of a collective “we” which would suggest the existence of a certain community of experience. In the world of the poem, the “we” are the passive side, deprived of any agency, which is exclusive to their antagonists, referred to using the general and anonymous “they”. This mode of constructing the opposition indicates that all those who do not qualify as “us” are “them”.

With such a scaffolding of the poem, let us now try to include additional information, including knowledge about the author, his biography and the most important traits of his work. Even the poet's Jewish background alone significantly modifies the plane of meanings. It will change even further when one considers the fact that he survived the Holocaust, in which he had lost most of his immediate family.

As soon as the biographical context is taken into account, the first two lines become a likely statement referring either to the Holocaust or to the centuries-long persecution of the Jews around the world. In the first case, the memory of fault would be associated with the survivors. It is their presence, the fact that they did not die with their fellow Jews, that constantly brings the tragedy of the Shoah back. In the latter case, the very existence of the Jewish people would likely come into play, being a thorn in the side not only to individual people or anti-Semitic groups but even to entire nations. In particular, the verse “they blame us because we are due to their fault” may be read as a collective accusation of anti-Semitism, as it suggests that the very existence of the Jews, or more precisely,

the fact that they still exist, is, from the point of view of their opponents (referred to by the plural pronoun “they”), a kind of fault, a sin. Hence, the desirable state of affairs would be to have them disappear completely from this world. The words concerning the memory of all “what they have done” essentially imply that all non-Jews were perpetrators.

The interpretative mechanism employed here may be metaphorically described as “textual memory”, whose mechanism relies on the absorption and use of similar structures and substances known from Grynberg’s earlier work. It must be remembered, however, that such a reading (interpretation) is the reader’s text rather than the author’s, as the former supplements textual understatements with additional contexts. On the other hand, one should probably assume that this is the author’s intention as well.

Devices similar to those in *Nasza wina* are also taken advantage of in several other pieces from *Dowód osobisty*. One of them is *Ulica Próżna* [*Hollow Street*]:

Hollow houses
 Hollow gates in and out
 Hollow staircases and stairways
 Hollow heavens

a Pompeian street but
 flayed alive
 and no faces on the walls
 nor bones in the ashes
 nor even ashes are there
 for it is not the mindless Vesuvius

While the invisible shopkeepers
 in the hollow shops await
 the unwary patrons (Grynberg 2006: 28)

Grynberg exploits the ambiguity resulting from the font of the title (all upper-case characters) so that it is difficult to determine unequivocally whether the word “PRÓŻNA” is a proper name or whether it is used in the adjectival sense. The content of the poem may suggest the latter possibility, as emptiness is the most important feature of the street described there. The space is deserted.⁶ The allusions in the text (the street is called “Pompeian”) suggest that it is the aftermath of some unspecified disaster. However, that calamity can be precisely identified if

⁶ The “landscape of emptiness” in Grynberg’s poetry is discussed by Karolina Koprowska (Koprowska 2016: 290–293). See also comments on the poem in Buryła 2006: 339–340.

the word “Próżna” is approached as a proper name (and thus in the most obvious fashion, both in terms of phraseology and usage). Although a Próżna street can be found in many Polish cities, the best-known one is located in the very centre of Warsaw. Warsaw's Próżna Street received its name in the 18th century due to the lack of buildings, but its contemporary connotations are much more important. During the Second World War, a length of the street remained within the boundaries of the ghetto. Moreover, Próżna is one of the few streets in the centre of Warsaw where fragments of buildings survived the destruction of the ghetto.⁷

The first four-line stanza, based on the principle of anaphoric repetition of the adjective “hollow”, serves to produce the impression of the permanent emptiness of the eponymous street. That void encompasses all aspects of the world: space (houses, gates and staircases), time (“sunrises”) and the spiritual realm (“hollow heavens”).⁸

The wartime history of Próżna Street in Warsaw supplies additional meanings to the substance of Grynberg's piece, enriching and justifying certain features of the poem's space. In its light, the phrase “hollow gates in and out” becomes ambiguous and, instead of being merely a neutral phraseologism, it also evokes the act of shooting (*strzał*) (the extermination of the ghetto?) as the direct cause of the emptiness of the street. Also, “hollow heavens” are no longer a metaphorical term denoting religious doubts and issues (e.g. concerning the existence of God) but permits the interpretation to include the strictly Holocaust-related accusation of Yahweh, who had abandoned his chosen people (including “God's silence”).

Moreover, the wartime fates of Próżna Street render its comparison (contrast) to ancient Pompeii more comprehensible. Although that ancient city was destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius, the wall paintings, mosaics as well as the remains of the victims of the disaster have at least survived. Meanwhile, virtually nothing remains of the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto. As the poem elucidates,

⁷ Próżna was excluded from the ghetto in March 1941, being previously located within the so-called “small ghetto”, an area separated from the “big” ghetto by Chłodna Street. While the northern part of the Jewish quarter was razed to the ground after the uprising of 1943, the southern part—excluded from the ghetto following the Great Action—largely survived (many buildings suffered damage during the later Warsaw Uprising; a number of tenements in Próżna Street were the direct staging area for the assault on the PAST building). As for Próżna, the buildings on both sides of the street survived the war. See e.g.: <http://warszawyhistoriaukryta.blogspot.com/2014/08/ulica-prozna.html> (with information on individual tenements as well as shops and businesses located in each before the war; last access 05.01.2023).

⁸ This represents a vivid contrast to the nature of the street in the inter-war period; located near Marszałkowska Street, it had numerous exclusive stores and was vibrant with life.

the annihilation of the ancient city was due to a natural catastrophe, the volcanic outburst of the “mindless Vesuvius”. The annihilation of the ghetto, on the other hand, was entirely planned and executed deliberately (which, objectively, makes it a premeditated crime) so that not the slightest trace remained.

The final three-line stanza may be approached as a reminiscence of the past, a time when the street used to teem with life. The present, however, invalidates this image. *Próżna* Street thoroughly fulfils the semantics of its name.

Adjacent to *Ulica Próżna*, the poem *Tsunami* is another case where a natural disaster provides a point of reference for talking about the Holocaust:

It too assaults suddenly
and murders whole towns

but everyone rushes to help
no need to beg or pay

and everyone is helped
and sympathized with

and the tsunami is more just
because it does not discern (Grynberg 2006: 29)

The first distich constructs an analogy between the eponymous cataclysm (Grynberg’s was most likely inspired by the great tsunami of 26 December 2004, triggered by an earthquake beneath the floor of the Indian Ocean, which struck Southeast Asia) and some unspecified event. What links the tsunami and the unnamed disaster in the poem is that both wreak destruction and death. The similarities end, however, with their ability to kill “whole towns”. The subsequent three distichs numerate the differences. These very differences make it possible to identify the second phenomenon as the Holocaust/Shoah. Grynberg’s poetic strategy is based precisely on the premise that the reader is versed in his work and can unequivocally interpret any allusions and ambiguities following the paradigm of, e.g. “if it’s Grynberg, he’s writing about the Holocaust”. Naturally, such a statement would be a far-reaching simplification, but this does not change the fact that, at least with regard to several poems from the most recent poetic volume by the author of *Żydowska wojna*, the principle does apply.

What, then, distinguishes the tsunami from the Holocaust? Firstly, the matter of aid. The observation about the widespread readiness to lend selfless support to the victims of the tsunami contrasts their plight with the fates of the Jews during the Second World War, whether living in the ghetto or hiding on the Aryan

side. After all, either (also because of the reprisals from the occupiers if one were caught doing so) very seldom received help, and often had to pay exorbitant sums for everything. Following the tsunami, help is provided to everyone, without exception. Also, everyone is given sympathy, whereas it was the opposite with the Jews, as no one felt sorry for them.⁹ Only a few could count on being helped. Within the reality of the poem, these issues remain in the realm of understatement.

The final distich articulates the notion that the tsunami is “more just/ because it does not discern”, destroying and killing everything and everyone in its path equally, regardless of nationality, social status and financial standing. Meanwhile, the Holocaust affected only one particular nation: the Jews.

Analogous to *Tsunami* or *Nasza wina*, meaning-generating mechanisms are also present in the poems *Miłość* [*Love*] (p. 14) or *Spadek* [*Inheritance*] (p. 13). Also, pieces such as *Pisarz* [*The Writer*] (p. 6) and *Różnica* [*The Difference*] (p. 24) may yield similar results in the bio- and bibliographic-oriented interpretation.

Miłość explores the affection between the nameless protagonist and the dead:

This love is natural
true and forever

he has always belonged to them
and no one is closer to him
especially today

through an oversight
he stayed on this side
death is indeed the end of separation (Grynberg 2006: 14)

In the world of the poem, the fact that he survived (“stayed on this side”) was deemed an “oversight”. This would mean that his proper place is in the world of the dead; it is with the latter that a true and actual bond exists. Therefore, the last verse, “death is indeed the end of separation”, may be approached as a consolation and a promise. One can only guess that the relationship with the world of the departed is sustained by virtue of memory. At the same time, the protagonist’s

⁹ The words concerning sympathy may harbour a distant allusion to the notion that the persecution suffered from the Germans was a punishment for the killing of Christ or for all Jewish deception and villainy, due to which the Jews deserved no compassion or charity. Another concept which may be involved is that the Jews were—allegedly—decidedly inferior in the social hierarchy or even functioned outside that hierarchy (being subhuman).

relationship with the world of the dead indirectly determines his relationship with the world of the living: a domain he finds strange and alien. The statement that “no one is closer to him / especially today” suggests that in the poem, the protagonist is already an elderly person approaching the end of his life. Hence that almost literal sense of closeness to the dead. Again, Grynberg’s biography and knowledge of his oeuvre prove helpful in interpretation, if only where the protagonist’s age is concerned (it may be recalled that the poet was born in 1936); a substantial number of his works evokes the figures of the relatives who perished in the Holocaust (suffice to say that the only members of his closest family to survive were he and his mother, whose death in the USA he described in *Kadisz* [*Kaddish*]). It then turns out that the poet’s closest relatives are, in a sense, dead/murdered/deceased.

The shortest of the aforementioned pieces, *Spadek*, captures a peculiar relationship between the unnamed protagonist (referred to by means of verbs in third person singular) and the past and a unique kind of “heritage”:

They left him a soul
many a soul

which is why he is so strong
empowered

which is why he lives so long
and takes so long to die (Grynberg 2006: 13)

When the poem is read along these lines, the protagonist feels communion with the dead/the murdered (within the micro-dimension of his immediate family and the macro-dimension spanning all victims of the Holocaust). Spiritual unity with those who perished entitles him to speak and act on their behalf in the world of the piece. The final distich characterizes the protagonist’s situation as a kind of living in death. His life be long indeed, but his entire existence consists in constantly sinking into death...

Grynberg’s latest volume, *Tamta ostatnia bożnica* [*That Last Synagogue*], is one of the few instances of direct lyric verse which explicitly draws on the theme of the Holocaust. The piece centres around a childhood memory which haunts the lyrical self, a recollection of a service in the synagogue in Stanisławów near Dobry, i.e. in the author’s native region. Interestingly, the lyrical self notes that the town is located “no more than fifty kilometres / from Treblinka”. This remark is quite significant insofar as elements of the reminiscence were provided with the adjective “last” (“last synagogue / last holiday / last service”). It is thus a vision

of the lost world of the Polish Jews. In the memory of the speaker, all participants of those events are just as they were at that particular moment (“and the boys in that world / are still boys / and the fathers grandfathers uncles / are fathers grandfathers uncles”). In the imaginings of the lyrical self, they have remained unchanged until the present. For this reason, he fears meeting them in the other world, where he will be the only one to look different (having grown old) and may not be recognized. That fear may quite legitimately be interpreted as an expression of peculiar remorse for having survived.

Tamta ostatnia bożnica may be regarded as a bridge between Grynberg's most recent volume and his earlier oeuvre, where many more pieces feature a lyrical self (the sylleptic subject) endowed with the traits of the author himself: a Jew, survivor of the Holocaust who blames the death of his loved ones and his people on virtually everything and everyone: European culture, Christian religion and their representatives.¹⁰ As already noted, such a self is immersed in death and sees it as their duty and obligation to tell the story of the Holocaust, whereby its very existence constitutes an active twinge of conscience affecting the aforementioned “accused”. In Grynberg's latest work, the subject thus structured is replaced by an impersonal communication (indirect paradigm), whose protagonist (denoted by the pronoun “he”) is often equipped with the characteristics of the actual author. Another much rarer variant (though already found in earlier volumes by Grynberg) consists in a generalizing utterance of the collective subject (the lyrical “we”, in which traits of the Jewish people may be sought). Consequently, the emphasis shifts from the realm of individual personal experience towards the objectivization of the issue and its generalization.

In *Prawda nieartystyczna* [*Non-Artistic Truth*], Grynberg described his writing as “exhumation in the literary sense”. He admitted of himself: “I became a writer of the dead because the living had enough of their own writers. I became the guardian of a great cemetery. A guardian of graves which do not exist beyond our memory. I watch that they are not desecrated, and I cannot complain of lack of work. It seems to me that this is what I live for, and sometimes even that this is why I do.” (Grynberg 1994: 198).¹¹ In this respect, the poetry of the author *Wojna żydowska* does not differ from his prose. Grynberg's poetic oeuvre harbours the mark of his personal experience of the Holocaust, while the lyrical subject of

¹⁰ See e.g. Buryła 2006 (especially Chapter Two: *Antysemityczne kręgi*).

¹¹ Several years ago, the writer reiterated that view in an article published by *Dwutygodnik*, in which he denounced the “erasure of the exterminated Jews from the map of local memory” in the 2014 tourist guide to the Dobre municipality (*Wybieram Dobre* 2014); see Grynberg 2016.

many poems is a sylleptic one. As if that were not enough, even the lyrical protagonist of indirect verse displays certain characteristics proper to the author. As the poet sees it, his role is to be a depositary of the memory of his murdered family and Jewish compatriots. He defines his role as “being a monument” whose existence alone serves to remind one of “the people who are not there anymore”.

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