

After the conference "Space and Memory" organized by the PAS Institute of Slavic Studies

The Muranów Axis



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Dr. Elżbieta Janicka, who presented a research project on Warsaw's symbolic space during the PAS Institute of Slavic Studies conference "Space and Memory," is interviewed by Maria Cyranowicz and Patrycja Dołowy (who also participated in the conference)

Maria Cyranowicz: Unlike the "Saxon Axis," the "Muranów Axis" is not a previously existing urban concept in Warsaw; it's a term you coined yourself.

Elżbieta Janicka: Yes. We can talk about the management of a city's symbolic space as an analogy to traditional urban space management. The Muranów Axis runs along the course of Stawki Street, connecting two symbolic places: two markers of memory and identity that generally get treated together as a kind of package, for example during diplomatic visits. This situation is poignantly formalized and visualized by a certain signpost whose arms - parallel but pointing in opposite directions - indicate Umschlagplatz 400m to the left, and the Monument to the Fallen and Murdered in the East 350m to the right.

The symbolic axis I'm talking about came about with the construction of the latter monument in 1995. The events it commemorates in fact have no connection to its particular location. Although scores of Polish citizens were deported between 1940-41, these events affected Poland's eastern regions, which had been occupied by the Soviets since 17 September 1939. The site in Warsaw was chosen arbitrarily.

M.C.: The monument's format is very suggestive: it depicts realistic railway tracks heading east, and a cargo train platform. The associative link to the nearby Umschlagplatz - the site of the Nazi deportations of Jews - is obvious. The forest of crosses on the platform is a clear symbol of martyrdom; however, it does carry cognitive dissonance, since it can't be assigned to a set of symbols connected with the history of the Ghetto.

E.J.: Yes, the reference to Umschlagplatz is made obvious by the common denominator of the train carriage and the location. At first sight this accumulation of crosses in a secular public space may also be reminiscent of the Auschwitz gravel pits. You need to take more time, to get closer to notice other identity markers, invariably defined by religious criteria. There's a Muslim (Tatar) blazon with a crescent and a five-pointed star, five Russian Orthodox crosses, and a tombstone with the Star of David opposite a shackled Polish eagle wearing a crown. However, the Warsaw locals think of the memorial - known as the Golgotha of the East - simply as "the wagon with crosses." It's shown on postcards, on the city website, and in a city guide recently published by the *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily, it features in children's drawings submitted to art competitions, and in the painting cycle by Jerzy Duda-Gracz entitled "The Golgotha of Jasna Góra of the Third Millennium."

Patrycja Dołowy: So what message emerges from such a juxtaposition of symbols?

E.J.: The Monument to the Fallen and Murdered in the East seems to represent a kind of commentary on Umschlagplatz. I see its existence in this particular location as an act establishing a dual symbolic symmetry. First, there's the symmetry of deportations of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to extermination camps and the deportations of Poles far into the Soviet Union - an equilibrium of suffering. This is probably why the Golgotha of the East doesn't really highlight the fact that the people deported from eastern Poland were Polish citizens of various nationalities: Poles,



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Street sign pointing towards the two symbolic places that form the Muranów Axis – Warsaw, Stawki Street

Jews, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Tatars. Piotr Eberhardt provided detailed statistics of the deportations in his 2010 book *Political Migrations in Poland (1939-1950)*. Second, this symmetry would fit into the theory of equivalence of the two totalitarian systems. There's also the symmetry of the numbers of victims: around 300,000 Jews deported from Umschlagplatz, and around 330,000 Polish citizens exiled in the four stages of Soviet deportations. However, this visually and mentally impressive construct doesn't really stand up to scrutiny. The Jews of Umschlagplatz were murdered in the gas chambers of Treblinka; immediately; all of them. The number of those deported to the Soviet Union doesn't follow the "fallen and murdered" formula, since – in spite of terrible conditions in exile – the majority of this group survived and many returned to Poland after the war.

M.C.: There's already a Monument to the Victims of Katyń at the Powązki Military Cemetery; Warsaw also has a stone obelisk dedicated to the memory of the officers of the Polish Army murdered in the East. The monument we're talking about here also functions as a Katyń memorial. How does it stand out compared to the others?

E.J.: *The Monument to the Fallen and Murdered in the East* is the most prominently exposed and the most imposing. It is now the site for anniversary ceremonies, which back in the 1980s took place in the Katyń section of the Powązki Military Cemetery as informal anti-establishment demonstrations. For example, two years ago there was a re-enactment of the Katyń executions as part of the "Katyń March of Shadows" at the monument we're discussing. It took place on 19 April 2009 – on the anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

P.D.: Why then in particular?

E.J.: It was because of the proximity to the Day of the Victims of the Katyń Massacre, established by the Sejm to be held on 13 April – according to press report, to commemorate the events of 1943.

M.C.: Surely you mean 1940?

E.J.: No, no. That's not a mistake. The journalists meant the date the Katyń massacre was exposed by the Nazis, which happened on 13 April 1943. The problem is that Katyń was then proclaimed by the Nazis to be a "Judeo-Bolshevik ritual murder."

M.C.: NKVD perpetrated the massacre in the spring of 1940. The Nazis already became aware of the graves of Polish officers in Katyń in summer 1942, and started exhuming bodies in winter 1943.

E.J.: The Nazis saw no need to release information on the Katyń massacre any earlier. Joseph Goebbels, Reich Minister of Propaganda, saw the discovery as an excellent propaganda tool at a time when the Third Reich was preparing for the final liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto. The Nazis were expecting to meet with armed resistance from the Jewish underground. In January 1943, the Jewish Combat Organization had opened fire when the Nazis began another transport, following the first major round of deportations (summer 1942). Clashes in the Ghetto lasted four days until the deportations were halted. The Nazis planned to enter the Ghetto on 19 April 1943; on 13 April, following Hitler's go-ahead, Nazi newspapers and radio announced "a mass extermination perpetrated by the Jews." After 14 April, the Polish-language Nazi propaganda newspaper *Nowy Kurier Warszawski* published detailed

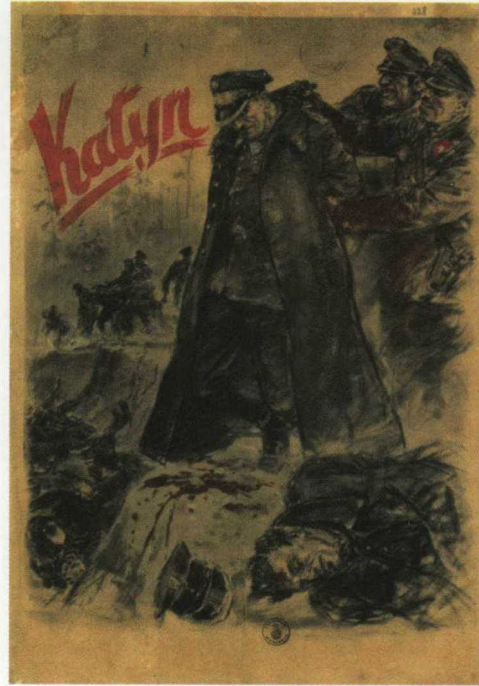
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daily reports on the Katyń massacre, as well as reminding the Poles that any assistance given to the Jews carried a death penalty. The issue from 17-18 April carried an article entitled "Monstrous Crime Led by Jews from the NKVD in Smoleńsk." In addition, anti-Semitic posters depicting the Katyń massacre were displayed throughout the General Government. They featured a mass grave filled with bodies, with a man wearing a Polish uniform and with his hands bound standing by the edge looking down; two figures seeming like anti-Semitic caricatures from the Nazi magazine *Der Stürmer* wearing NKVD uniforms, their arms covered in blood, are pointing a gun at the back of his head.

P.D.: The Nazi propaganda aimed to stir anti-Semitic feeling in Poles?

E.J.: Jan Grabowski wrote a report on this subject, entitled "Anti-Semitic Propaganda in the General Government, 1939-1945." While Nazi propaganda against the Western Allies met with a lot of public resistance, anti-Semitism was different. The phantasm of the "Żydokomuna" – the anti-Semitic stereotype that identified Jews with Communists – propagated by the Catholic church and the right-wing National Democracy party, was treated as something real rather than a mystification. The Nazi-driven interpretation of the Katyń massacre as having been perpetrated by the Jews caught on, and continues to shape many narratives on the Polish-Jewish relations until today. In 2001, Poland's Primate Józef Glemp issued a public statement on the Jedwabne massacre, invoking a "Katyń – Jedwabne" symmetry, seemingly sanctioning the logic of retaliation. The Primate's words were accepted by Polish public opinion. The only critical analysis of the statement, published by Tomasz Żukowski from the PAS Institute of Literary Research, was largely ignored.

The Żydokomuna myth persists in Poland as one of the moral forms of legitimizing massacres committed against Jews by the Poles, including the Polish independence underground. The murderous consequences of the myth have been explored by Krzysztof Jasiewicz from the PAS Institute of Political Studies in his book *Pierwsi po diable*. *Elity sowieckie w okupowanej Polsce 1939-1941* ["First After the Devil – Soviet Elites in Occupied Poland, 1939-1941"], published in 2001. In 2009, *Academia* published an interview includ-



Nazi poster displayed in the General Government from Easter 1943. Reproduction from the National Temple of Divine Providence, Warsaw, Easter 2009

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ing Anna Zawadzka from the PAS Institute of Slavic Studies, author of the study *Żydokomuna*. *Szkic do socjologicznej analizy źródeł historycznych* ["Żydokomuna – A Sketch for Sociological Analysis of Historical Sources"].

M.C.: The square where the Monument to the Fallen and Murdered in the East is located is now called Matki Sybiraczki Square – a new name given to it in 2008, commemorating the "Siberian exile mother." What impact has this had on the Muranów Axis?

E.J.: Just like Sybiraków Square, Zesłańców Polskich Street, and Zesłańców Syberyjskich Roundabout, all commemorating Polish exiles to Siberia, and the *Ofiar Zbrodni Katyńskiej* Roundabout, commemorating the Katyń victims, this *Matki Sybiraczki* Square constitutes yet another Warsaw memorial to the Poles martyred by Russia and the Soviet Union. The figure of the "Siberian exile mother" likely evolved from Mickiewicz's archetypal Polish Mother topos, whose origins date back to just before the November Uprising of 1831. The signboard with the new name is surrounded by young birch trees – symbols of Polish martyrdom since the 1863 January Uprising and Artur Grottger's sketches. The new name enhances and strengthens the tale.

P.D.: The square was reconstructed roughly where Nalewki Street connected to Muranowski

Square before the war. Aren't these places a symbolic part of the city's identity?

E.J.: Absolutely. Nalewki was one of the city's main arteries, and Muranowski Square formed the heart of Jewish Warsaw. During the Ghetto Uprising, it was the site of one of the main resistance points: a unit of the Betar Movement, an opposition group not affiliated with the Jewish Combat Organization. This is proclaimed on a plaque in three languages (Polish, English, and Hebrew). However, the plaque doesn't mention that the Betarim were murdered by the Aryan side. This happened in spite of - or perhaps because of - the Betar Movement's extensive contact with the Polish independence underground. The plaque is placed out of the way, shielded by trees, and the translucent Plexiglas blends into the pastel façade. It's basically invisible.

M.C.: The spirit of the old Muranów is pretty much absent from the Muranów Axis in this location.

E.J.: We've seen a significant symbolic shift. For Umschlagplatz I would call it a procedure of enclosure, while for the Muranowski Square the situation is one of substitution. We can observe similar trends in humanistic thought. The experience of the Holocaust is now regarded as a trauma, based on the experiences of Jewish Holocaust survivors as well as the second and third generations. This originally American concept, first formulated during the 1970s, has shifted to Polish discourse on the Holocaust.

It's presupposed that the Polish experience of the Holocaust was a collective trauma, analogous to the Jewish experience. In terms of Raul Hilberg's triad (perpetrators - victims - bystanders), Poles have been regarded as witnesses: powerless and passive. Of course we're talking about the Polish majority - determining the shape of dominating attitudes and behaviors. In my view, since the category of bystander is inadequate for the Polish context, it hinders reflection and should be replaced by a more precise tool, such as the category of participant observation - through thought, speech, actions, and negligence.

The concept of the Holocaust as collective trauma for Poles was presented in Michael C. Steinlauf's 1997 book *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*. Steinlauf describes the Polish experience of the Holocaust as traumatic: unassimilated, unconscious, and hence not included in the historical narration of identity. It seems to me that the memory of the Holocaust has indeed been assimilated in Poland, but not in a way that would suit the theoreticians of post-traumatic culture. This assimilated memory of the Holocaust seems to be expressed by enclosing and substituting lieux de mémoire (sites of memory) dedicated to the Holocaust - by using symbols which have become "holocaustized." There are two mechanisms at play: segregation ("you have your trauma, we have ours") and symmetric configuration (different traumas are regarded as equivalent). But the Muranów Axis also indicates something else. These traumas also figure in a cause-effect relationship: to start with we had Communism, and a defensive response was just a matter of time, something basically inevitable, a necessity. This is reminiscent of the logic of the anti-Bolshevik crusade against all Jews, also the logic of Ernst Nolte and his supporters in the German Historikerstreit. A similar thought process can be found in how symbolic spaces in numerous cities and towns throughout Poland are managed. We really should show more care for the environment in which we live, and I don't just mean nature. ■

Further reading:

Janicka E. (2010) Holocaustization: The Myth of the Warsaw Uprising in *Kinderszenen* by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, trans. Graff A. [in:] Molisak A., Ronen S. (ed.) *Polish and Hebrew Literature and National Identity*. Warsaw: Elipsa, pp 275 -289.

Re-enactment of the
Katyn massacre as part
of the Katyn March of
Shadows - Warsaw,
Matki Sybiraczki
Square, 19 April 2009



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