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Living on the ashes: Collective representations of Polish–Jewish history among people living in the former Warsaw Ghetto area

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ABSTRACT

Before WWII Jews constituted one third of the Warsaw population. Muranów is the heart of the former Jewish district, the central area of the Warsaw Ghetto, installed by the Nazis in 1940. This district was totally destroyed during the war and its present urban shape not in the least reminds of its pre-war past. In this study, we investigated the collective memory of the district and representations of the Polish–Jewish history shared by contemporary inhabitants of Muranów. Ninety four residents were interviewed at their homes. The results show that "people living on the ashes" perceive the Jewish history of their place of residence as important and meaningful even though almost no visible remnants of the Jewish pre-war district have survived. The present attitudes and memories of the contemporary inhabitants seem to be shaped by the public ceremonies and educational tours which take place in the district, by presence of commemorating monuments and by the street names. These findings emphasize the crucial role of urban reminders such as museums, monuments and street names in the dynamics of collective memory.

Collective memory and place memory – a review

Since the publication of the fundamental work of Halbwachs (1950) on collective memory, social scientists accept the view that memories of individuals are framed and shaped by collective representations of the past shared within their groups (Liu and Hilton, 2005; Misztal, 2003). The role of memory is not limited only to reconstruction of past events; memory also serves an important function in forming collective identities and legitimizing current actions taken by the group. Even more important, collective memories may concern events which – due to geographical or temporal distance – were not directly experienced by ourselves and are therefore the result of cultural transmission. But even in the case of events that were personally witnessed by an individual, their reconstruction can be distorted due to group norms and collective narratives. This is especially true for traumatic or highly emotional experiences (Alexander, 2004; LaCapra, 2001; Shortt and Pennebaker, 1992).

In this paper, we focus on a special kind of collective memory, the *place memory* (Lewicka, 2005, 2008a,b; Nora, 1989; Young, 1993). Place memory differs from other forms of collective memory in at least two ways. First of all, place memory consists of memories related to the history of specific space that can be stored on both individual and collective level. Individuals fill the places they work in, travel to or inhabit, with meanings and emotions that are derived from their individual experience. But a place can be also subject to collective memory. Place memory can be transmitted in a set of commemorative practices that provide individuals with "appropriate" interpretations and meanings of a given space (Pomorski Mikulowski, 1996). National histories are filled with places of special importance for establishing of national identity. Paris for France, Kosovo for Serbs, and Częstochowa for Poles are just a few examples.

Second, place memory is unique due to the manner in which it is transmitted and preserved. The meaning of place, its *genius loci*, is shaped not only by the media, historical lessons or family histories – that is, not only through *text* – but also through the physical form of the place itself (Lewicka, 2008a,b). The architecture of the area, its historical monuments, characteristic public buildings, and street names – all serve as "mnemonic aids", urban reminders of events important for the collective memory. And of course, since the physical shape of place is highly dependent on decisions of local or national governments, place memory is also related to current politics. Lewicka (2008a,b) explored empirically the role played by such urban reminders in place memory of two cities which after WWII were part of different nations, as were their populations: Lviv (now Ukrainian, formerly Polish city), and Wrocław (now Polish, formerly German city). The studies showed that

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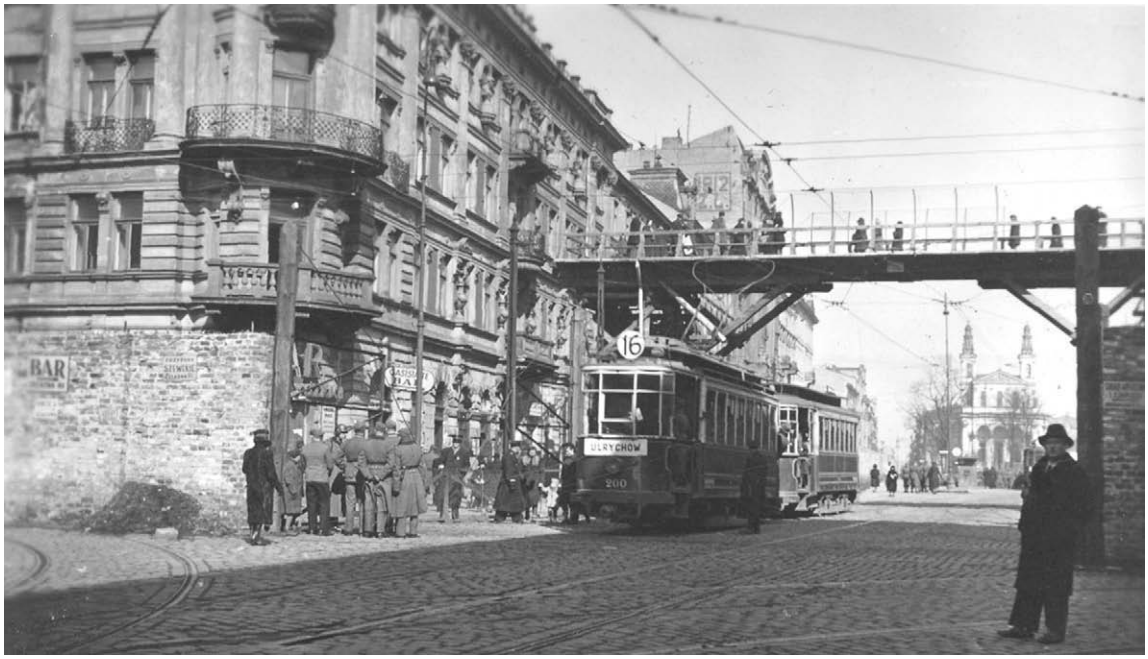

Photo 1. Chłodna street. View of the bridge connecting the big and small Ghetto. Walls of the Ghetto are clearly visible on both sides. Property of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

contemporary inhabitants of districts rich in urban reminders (i.e. districts filled with historic buildings from the pre-war times and the traditionally shaped street layout) had better knowledge of the city history and were less willing to perceive the history of their city through national lenses than residents of districts filled with modern, post-war architecture.

Muranów – the heart of the Jewish Warsaw

The Warsaw district Muranów is a unique and fascinating location for research on place memory. The district obtained its name from the name of a small palace, constructed in the 17th century by the Italian architect, Joseph Bellotti, named Murano, after the name of a small island, part of Venice, where he came from. Before WWII, the area was the heart of the Jewish district, densely built with the 19th century tenements, lively, crowded, and noisy (Bartoszewski and Polonsky, 1990). In 1940, the Nazis built walls around a large portion of the inner city thus creating the Warsaw Ghetto (Photo 1). Muranów became the central part of the Ghetto, being located next to the Umschlagplatz, the place from which main transports of Jews were sent to the concentration camps. The place was totally destroyed during and after the Jewish uprising in the Ghetto in 1943, and later in 1944 during the systematic bombing of the city. Only individual buildings survived the hecatomb (Photo 2).

After the Second World War, the Muranów space acquired special meaning and became a place of differentiated and often contradictory commemorative practices (Bilewicz, Ostolski, Wójcik & Wysocka, 2004; Young, 1993). Not long after the Second World War, Nathan Rapoport's Warsaw Ghetto Monument was unveiled,[1] as the communist regime had decided to commemorate the heroism and martyrdom of Warsaw's Jews (Photo 3). Regardless of the Rapoport's intentions, however, the official interpretation of the monument focused on the contribution of left-wing participants (especially communists) to the Ghetto Uprising (Steinlauf, 1997; Young, 1993). In the following years, during the uprising anniversaries, mass celebrations were organized at the square in front of the monument. The official speeches and press discourse that accompanied those events described the Ghetto Uprising as just another example of the fight between Fascism and Socialism.

By erecting the monument, the authorities did not intend to commemorate the entire Jewish history of Warsaw. Pre-war Muranów was the heart of the Jewish district. The area was a chaotic maze of narrow streets, with densely built-tenement houses and dark, well-like courtyards, where the ground floors of the houses were occupied by tiny shops or workshops. The architects did not intend to rebuild the district in its pre-war form as it was not in accordance with the modern socialist architecture. Because of the total destruction of the pre-war Muranów, the avant-garde architects had a unique opportunity to shape and rebuild the district from scratch (Engelking and Leociak, 2009; Leociak, 2008a,b). The new development, built on the ashes of the Ghetto, was to be full of greenery and light. Muranów also became a place of a socialist experimentation in the process of the rebuilding of Warsaw, as the technological innovations that were later used in other districts of the city were first introduced there. Journalists wrote about the new "collective" organization of work, contrasted with "individualistic" and inefficient ways of work under capitalism. It was in Muranów where the famous crushed-brick concrete[2] was used for the first time on a large scale. Thus, in the political and media discourse, Muranów itself became a symbol of a completely new socialist era in architecture and urban development (Photo 4).

The mnemonic landscape of Muranów was thus shaped by two opposite forces. First was the will to commemorate the tragedy of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Its main manifestations were erecting the Nathan Rapoport's Warsaw Ghetto Monument on 19th

[1] It is worth mentioning that the Nathan Rapoport's Warsaw Ghetto Monument was the first object built in the Muranów district after the Second World War. Because of the total destruction of the Ghetto area by Nazis, it stood in the centre of a sea of ruins and ashes. The Monument was also the second memorial built in Warsaw after the Second World War. The first was the memorial dedicated to Russian soldiers – "liberators of Warsaw" – built in 1946 in the eastern part of the city.

[2] The crushed-brick concrete consisted of the brick fragments extracted from ruins and bonded with concrete.