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UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE, LOCAL EXPERIENCE – TRANSNATIONAL NEGOTIATIONS

Abstract

The paper addresses the texts – in the Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian language – reated to the memory of World War II and Shoah from the perspective of the second generation of artists. Local strategies of returning to the past and their function (foremostly in the context of the war 1991 − 1995 and the subsequent transition) will be dealt with based on the concept of Multidirectional Memory by M. Rothberg and trauma mirrorings by S. Creps. The universalised idiom Shoah, as related to its uncomforable counterpart, provides an impulse for reflecting on national traumas, painful histories, as well as the attempts to diagnose contemporary illnesses, and the conditions of memory / identity. This research will isolate similarities and differences, elaborate on the use of accents in national negotiations of the memory of Shoah / war in the area (post-Yugoslav), and further inquire whether they are described or given attention (if so, in which way) within the space of the wider Central European trend of Post-Memory literature.

Keywords: cultural memory, negotiations of memory, Multidirectional Memory, Post-Memory, former Yugoslavia

A Universal Language of Memory?

Approaching the phenomenon of cultural memory from the standpoint of universalism may at first seem methodologically unproductive, as it is based on a certain contradiction that results from juxtaposing the notions considered mutually exclusive within the framework of traditional research. The most important research of the so-called *memory boom* period (Winter, 2000) clearly distinguishes history − that, in principle, objectifies reality − from collective and cultural memory: representations communally constructed and shared (reproduced) within concrete social groups. Memory − understood as cultural practice − used to be primarily analysed within a specific social framework: in reference to a certain point in time as well as geopolitical reality in which its inhabitants were found (Halwsbachs, 1992). Following Pierre Nora's monumental project, *Lieux de mémoire* (Nora, [1984 − 92] (1996 − 8)), it is the nation that denotes a mnemonic community, and, since the 1980s, such a conception has been discussed most. However, as of the year 2000, there has emerged an ever-increasing critique of the research stemming from the national paradigm. In the introduction to *Memory in a Global Age*, Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad contend that the nation ceased to function as a "natural container of memory debates" and declare a need for an examination of the phenomena that challenge traditional conceptions of cultural memory (Assmann and Conrad, 2000: 6). All the inadequacies of the previous theoretical

framework are a result of issues such as globalization and migrations, both of which have considerably changed the spatial positions of partakers in local mnemonic communities, atomizing them and developing new memory configurations connected with the change of cultural contexts. Undoubtedly, migrations − which should be understood as both spatial relocations of individuals and geographical, economic, political and cultural transfers of traditions and/or *habitus* − break the continuity of the project proposed by Nora (Erll, 2011). Another crucial factor that has shaped the current situation is the rapid advancement of new media and technology that makes possible the circulation of memories on a global scale together with their virtual multiplications. Not only does such advancement cause movement in space, but also in time. More and more frequently we observe the phenomenon of taking over "someone else's memories" and identifying with second-hand experiences mediated through various representations. Marianne Hirsch puts forward the concept of post-memory (Hirsch, 1997) to describe such experiences, whereas Allison Landsberg emphasizes the significance of the so-called prosthetic memory (Landsberg, 2004). All the phenomena described above, on the one hand, prove that cultural memory circulates beyond family, ethnic and national constraints. On the other hand, a question arises whether—in the era of such dispersion and pluralization of memory − it is possible to delineate a coherent framework for a new memory community that would be transgenerational, trans-ethnic and transnational. What could constitute its common denominator? Aleida Assmann in *The Holocaust – a Global Memory? Extensions and Limits of a New Memory Community* considers such a project plausible. For the past decade, we have witnessed the birth of global memory, which the scholar defines as a migration of recognizable motifs and "peculiar discursive spaces where memories are located" across diverse local cultures and memory communities (Assmann, 2010). Assmann's argument is oriented towards the most prominent recurring icon, which, undoubtedly, is the Holocaust. Due to its complexity (as an event and experience), radical ideology, geography and bureaucratic "perfectionism", the Holocaust is transnational in character, and nowadays it constitutes a paradigmatic model of genocide in the world, both universal (rupture of civilization) and particular (limited primarily to the Jewish community). The fact that the Holocaust crosses national borders is determined by its spatiality and subsequent migrations of its partakers. The very migration of the witnesses and their descendants, however, is not necessarily a direct impulse to generate global memory in this context, Assmann contends. It is rather an array of international institutional activities initiated by the societies that consider themselves partakers in the memory of the Holocaust that is crucial. One such example is the initiative "The International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research" founded in 1998. Historical memory results from a direct relation between a specific historical event and the memory of it. Hence partakers in the Holocaust memory community are: Israel and the Jewish diaspora as well as the Allies of World War II fighting the Third Reich and giving shelter to the survivors. Also, all the other European countries where the events contributing to the Shoah took place as well as the nations under Nazi occupation together with the Nazi Germany and its collaborators have to be taken into account. Such political initiatives are meant to negotiate a common narration about the past by creating a network of cooperative institutions and providing sufficient financial support. In this way educational programs, remembrance exhibitions as well as national heritage programs and memory archives could be consolidated and unified (Assmann, 2010: 101−105).

Another process, parallel to the abovementioned, which sketches the contours of global memory understood as separated from historical memory, as Assmann states, is the phenomenon of Holocaust globalization, which manifests itself mainly in dissemination of Holocaust images across popular culture. Such icons available in nearly every part of the

world are interiorized in a similar way by the spectators with radically different experiences. Assmann refers to Daniel Levy and Nathaniel Sznaider's conception presented in *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*. Levy and Sznaider emphasize various mechanisms of disseminating Shoah images in the media and point to the significance of this dissemination: its empathetic potential and performative community-consolidating power. According to the authors, Holocaust memory, exemplary of collective trauma, can be internalized by other oppressed groups, who "recognize their own suffering in the fate of Jewish victims" (Levy and Sznaider 2001: 56). Thus, this memory gets transformed into "the model of national self-criticism, spreading human rights as the legitimizing principle of global society and helping to affirm difference" (Levy and Sznaider 2001: 232). In other words, Holocaust memory, as a kind of regulator or an ethical axis determining a new democratic ethos, could be perceived as a guarantee of human rights − a normative value that broadens the perspective of (self)-reflection on both the individual and collective experience of other forms of violence. As a reference point, Holocaust memory fosters a sense of critical examination: "while traditional and exemplary narratives deploy historical events to promote foundational myth, the critical narrative emphasizes events that focus on past injustices of one's own nation. Cosmopolitan memory thus implies some recognition of the history (and the memories) of the 'Other' " (Levy and Sznaider, 2002: 103).

Assmann, however, distances herself from understanding the global in the context of both historical memory and moral norm, proposing instead a slightly different status of the Holocaust in the transnational discourse that corresponds with them − that of an icon and symbol. The former is described as "an ultimate reduction and condensation of the memory that, in spite of its fragmentation, nevertheless retains something of its affective quality for which it is used and re-mediated in ever-new contexts. The icon expresses the truth about the Holocaust in its most abridged and condensed form" (Assmann, 2010: 109). Condensation and abridgment in this context may, on the one hand, connote a threat of oversimplification; on the other hand, such reduction intensifies the image and lays bare its essence. In this way, the Holocaust icon becomes a metaphor for the ultimate evil. The symbolization process develops in several stages: de-contextualization, symbolic extension, emotional identification and analogy. Assmann, perceiving both icon and symbol as rhetorical tropes, points to their usefulness in narrating other traumas and acts of mass violence. As textual figures, such "references to the Holocaust are increasingly being used to call attention to other traumas and atrocities. In this metaphoric extension, the Holocaust has become a free-floating signifier that is readily associated with all kinds of manifestations of moral evil, and which today can invariably be applied to any pain, destruction, trauma or disaster (such as in 'bombing holocaust', 'nuclear holocaust' and so on)" (Assmann, 2010: 114). One could thus risk a hypothesis that the Shoah discourse, "as part of a political agenda, as a cosmopolitan reference, a universal norm or a global icon" (Assmann, 2010: 112), constitutes a kind of transnational code that encourages reflection not only on historical memory but also, depending on the context, on other local narrations. By becoming an (un)comfortable parallel, the Shoah furthers rumination on national traumas and other acts of violence. It also creates a vantage point from which to examine the (identarian) condition of social groups other than those directly affected during World War II.

What has been established above constitutes a point of departure for further reflection on the presence of the Holocaust motif in the newest literature produced in the countries of former Yugoslavia. Even though post-Yugoslav societies participate in the European Shoah memory community and therefore such a vantage point is not only justified but also quite necessary, I have chosen the works which do not directly refer to the Holocaust; instead, I have focused on the texts in which the Holocaust functions as the abovementioned icon,

throwing new light on the plots concentrated on the Yugoslav Wars following the breakup of the country and the transition period. By juxtaposing the three texts − Bosnian (*Elijahova Stolica* by Igor Štiks), Serbian (*Mein Kampf* by Svetislav Basara) and Croatian (*Totenwande* by Daša Drndić) − and with a certain deal of arbitrariness, I shall point to the local strategies of returning to the past as well as elaborate on the gesture of employing the Holocaust icon in the context of particular national experiences. Furthermore, I would like to reflect on the possible functions, aims and ethical significance of such a gesture.

Local Experience

We shall go back to the question of historical memory for a while. South Slavs directly participated in the events of World War II, and their territories became an arena for the atrocities of the conflict. Thus the Holocaust is also their internal problem, a collective experience they are accountable for and have to cope with.

The peculiarity of the situation in which the nations remaining within the borders of Yugoslavia until 1991 found themselves consists in the fact that during World War II they all adopted radically different ideological and political positions, which determined a somewhat asymmetrical character of individual ethnic groups' collective memory for the next several decades. The frame of reference for Croatian collective memory can be found in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), fascist in character, and the *Ustaše* regime (Croatian Revolutionary Movement) (1941 − 45) − considered by some a sign of political independence, but *de facto* putting the Croatian nation in the position of perpetrators. Serbian, Bosnian and Herzegovinian collective memory oscillates between the victim category and the martyrology of resistance. Moreover, ideological differences, determined and sustained by ethnic identification, for nearly half a century remained in the shadow of the myth of the anti-fascist partisans that constituted a binding force for mutually exclusive local manifestations of memory work in the Yugoslav historical discourse. The communist regime, implicitly international, effectively blocked any possibility of coping with the national traumas of World War II within public discourse. The situation described above is typical of the societies remaining under the influence of totalitarian ideologies after World War II, mainly those of Central and Eastern Europe.

A specific character of memory work in post-Yugoslav societies is evident mainly in the fact that when the process of coping with the traumas of World War II in Greater Europe, catalysed by a series of political transformations brought about by the fall of the Berlin Wall, entered its final phase, Yugoslavs faced new massacres and collective traumas of the Yugoslav Wars (1991 − 1995). The ethnic conflict definitely cast a shadow on a more distant past, blocking any possibility of critical reflection on it. However, specific acts of memory work transgressing the constraints of the communist discourse did happen in war circumstances, when the emerging nations (Croatian and Serbian) remained in jeopardy and their public discourse was dominated by nationalist disputes. At the same time, numerous distortions of the memory of World War II were perpetuated, especially by the infamous Ustasha and Chetnik movements. Such nationalist abuse of Holocaust imagery in the official narrations of the 1990s was an abomination that only attested to the instrumental use of history for political gains.

In the process of such abuse perpetrator-victim relations are always disturbed − it is sufficient to mention the so-called "numbers game" at Jasenovac or the interpretation of the Bleiburg events as "the Croatian Holocaust." The politics of memory based on the Holocaust icon from the radical nationalist period of the 1990s in Serbia and Croatia is exhausted by David Macdonald in his book *Balkan holocausts? Serbian and Croatian victim-centred*

propaganda and the war in Yugoslavia (Macdonald, 2003). What needs to be stressed in this essay, however, is that in the case of the post-Yugoslav region, the abuse of the Holocaust icon was so blatant that it constituted a convenient point of reference for the narrations subjugated by compensatory propaganda.

I have signalled this historical context (public discourse and the nationalist ideologies of the 1990s), which stands in opposition to the universalized rhetoric of the moral norm, because it throws new light on the texts I am interested in. Their authors seem to take a firm stand against such a framework for local "uses" of the Holocaust memory.

(Un)comfortable Parallels

Published in 2006, *Elijahova Stolica* (Elijah's Chair) is a truly epic multi-layered novel, "a new version of the Oedipus story," an attempt—as the author Igor Štiks himself claims—to answer what seems a Kundera-esque question about the human condition and the poetry that inhabits it (Pintarić, 2006). The novel tells a story of Richard Richter, an Austrian writer and journalist, who, in his sixtieth year accidentally discovers that his identity has been built on lies. Orphaned by both his mother, who died in childbirth in 1942, and his father, who committed suicide shortly after he had returned from "that War," Richard, raised by his aunt, has to cope with the dark past of his nation. Rebelling against his parents' generation, he seems to be a typical representative of the first Austrian post-war "lost" generation. One day he finds an old coffer with his mother's letters in it. From the letters he learns that he is a son of a Sarajevan Jew, who was a communist activist arrested in Vienna and sent to a concentration camp in the fateful year 1942. Richard accepts a position of war correspondent and travels to the besieged city of Sarajevo to find the addressee of the letters. Wandering through the streets of the city, he establishes plenty of mysterious contacts and meets the last love of his life. Eventually, he does find his father and learns the story of his life. Simultaneously, Richard starts an incestuous relationship with Alma, an actress engaged in a theatrical adaptation of Max Frisch's *Homo Faber*.

Subversive use of the *flâneur* topos and a number of intertextual references to the canonical works of European modernism are not the only devices employed by Štiks. The writer also clearly refers to the poetics of testimony and confession, thematizing a problem of "taking off one's mind a load that Charon will not let aboard his boat" (Štiks 2006, 15), "reworking rotten matter into a novel," and "trying to restore order, make sense, organize" memories (Štiks, 2006: 14). Tropes such as compulsive writing down of experience and problematizing memory work characterize a genre which Birgit Neumann calls "fictions of memory" (Neumann, 2009). Štiks effortlessly navigates the poetics of memory. Sketching complicated genealogies of his characters, he contends that one's identity and background have a profound impact on one's actions. However, there arises a question about the purpose of taking the protagonist to Sarajevo. For the structure of the foundational experience to be preserved, the hero's father could be a Jew from any other place in Eastern Europe. The story, however, takes place in the City, the besieged Sarajevo and the chronicler of events is not Richard, but Ivor, Richard's companion, a native of Sarajevo who finds the protagonist's notes. It turns out that this story within a story, *mise en abyme*, is told not by a World War II survivor but by a young Bosnian from the besieged city. In this way, a parallel between the two events − World War II and the Bosnian War − is built. As Štiks states, he wanted to pay homage to the place he grew up in and whose tragedy he witnessed. Parallel stories of forbidden love of the father and son bring out the story of violence happening in the background. The choice of Sarajevo is deliberate, because it was in Bosnia where the only act of genocide in Europe after 1945 took place. The life of the protagonist comes full circle—his

repeated birth during a different war constitutes a suggestive allusion to the tragedy of the besieged City (and Holocaust).

Štiks chooses a fairly simple narrative strategy, rooted in realism and mimetism, which means that there is a direct correspondence of events in the text (World War II − Bosnian War) − in concern with the definition of an iconic signifier. The problem of reference is much more complicated in Svetislav Basara's novel (2011), which already in its provocative title, *Mein Kampf*, signals a more confusing field of metonymic references. The novel does not deal with a specific historical event, but rather with an overall atmosphere in Serbia in the last twenty five years and the identarian condition of its people. Neither a World War II survivor nor any direct references to a more distant past can be found in the plot. In other words, there is no structural link between the present and the past. By introducing a protagonist who is waiting to undergo neurological surgery, the author locks the story within the irrational discourse of disease and delirium. The title page reads, "the whole world is one big hospital; only those who can understand it in time have a chance to stay healthy." *Mein Kampf* is a paranoid-grotesque work sprinkled with irony that tells a story of an attempt to stay healthy and independent in a world submerged by nationalist madness. The only way to do it is to retreat from it into a disease. The narrator makes the following diagnosis of reality: "After all these years, SFRY burst like a balloon it had always been, and it's now fully controlled by the neo-Nazis. Let them say what they want, but this whole mess of the late eighties had nothing to do with democracy. It was a most straightforward version of nazification" (Basara, 2001, 45). In his monologue, the narrator creates a pamphlet: he criticizes the society of the transition period, employing the national socialist idiom. Real-life characters appear in the story, although they are provocatively camouflaged. Thus "Veliki Sotona" is Dobrica Ćosić, "doktor Mengele pravnih znanosti" is Vojislav Koštunica, "gauleiter of the Serbian Weimar Republic" is Boris Tadić, troops patrolling the cities make up "Serbian Wermacht," and the ruling party is "Nacionalsocijalistička partija Srbije". The narrator talks about a fight against "the Nazi manipulation of the idea of the nation," and about an attempt to reach "the depths of the collective unconscious." By stressing the intimate dimension of his text and its anti-fascist character, Basara radically alters the meanings of his historical antecedent. Grotesque carnivalization of the world, Rabelais-like in its character, *ergo* a critique of "paradajz-fasizm", consists in provocative instrumentalization of the memory of World War II − a negative parallel. It would seem that such a literary device could cause disgust or even moral objection in the reader. However, the disease/insanity framework employed by Basara mitigates such a tone. According to Assmann's classification, in its relation to the Holocaust, the disease could be classified as an, somewhat paradoxical, *analogy*. The Holocaust is a rhetorical trope in the novel. It legitimizes the status of the "local" problem, accentuating the image of "unethical activities." At the same time, it serves as a peculiar *instigator*, provoking the reader to ask him/herself a question whether there is something to be concerned about, and if it all is only grotesque, is it meant as a warning?

The third example of a work that references World War II is the novel *Totenwande* (2000) by Daša Drndić, which is a part of Drdnić's elaborate project that brings together some of the features of Štiks' and Basara's novels described above. On the one hand, *Totenwande* refers to historical memory and the legacy of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH); on the other hand, it constitutes a reflection on the human condition in general, largely impacted by the unarticulated traumas of the 20th century. Drndić's works, thematically and structurally, develop into a remarkable *opus magnum*. A hint at *Totenwande* can already be found on page 61 of her earlier novel, *Canzone di guerra* (1998), whose ending reads "it's not over yet" (Drdnić, 1998: 61). *Totenwande*, with its "to-be-continued" ending (Drndić, 2000: 47) is a prelude to her later novels (*Leica format*, *Doppelgänger* and *Belladonna*). In all of these

novels we find a recurring motif of History (its universal mechanisms as well as specific historical events), which serves as a starting point for a deeper analysis of the nature of totalitarianism and the experience of World War II as well as their repercussions. All of these tragedies marked the survivors, their descendants − and the entire humankind − for life.

The story that the novel retells in newer and newer configurations, exposes the cycle of interdependence that extends far beyond family bonds and a sense of nationhood. The characters move from the pages of one novel to the next (especially the Koše family whose members, each in turn, discover their Jewish roots), reenacting certain patterns of behaviour, as if these patterns were dictated by the past. The narrative strategy, however, seems unchanged over the course of all the texts − it consists in the real autobiographical "I" constantly permeating the fictional "I" with the equal participation of other voices coming from various registers of reality. The stories told by the protagonists are placed side by side with dramatic monologues, phantasmagoric messages from Hitler and Stalin, quotes from the classics, quasi-documents in the form of letters or family trees, as well as authentic documents, such as biographical notes and extracts from the Yad Vashem Archive and encyclopaedias. The reader is thus faced with a multiplication of iconic representations and metonymic Shoah figures, and their juxtapositional arrangement.

Totenwande is an example of such poetics. The story is narrated by Konrad Koše, born in Zagreb in 1939 to a Croatian father (an outstanding chess player and *Ustaša,* who flees the country) and Jewish mother. During the war Konrad's mother conceals her identity and works for the occupant. Only after many years does Konrad, like the protagonist of *Elijahova Stolica*, discover his identity, which seems at odds with clear-cut distinctions between the guilty and the victims, and rather consists in negation and denial (the figure of the mother). Konrad initiates a family investigation and writes down his "confession," in which the voices articulating the greatest tragedies of the 20th century, wars, concentration camps and acts of violence are intertwined. As the investigation develops, the history of his family turns out to follow dangerous "universal" patterns, and so do his actions. The investigation clearly shows how developing an awareness of the past disrupts the established order and brings about mental discomfort. The uncomfortable legacy Konrad has long been in denial about is manifest in both Konrad's biography and in the story of his lover Jacqueline, a woman "rotten to the core," who turns out to be the daughter of Doctor Kurt Heissmayer responsible for medical experiments on children in concentration camps. On a more universal level, Drdnić mentions such abominations as profit-seeking cooperation with the fascist authorities of such companies as Bayer or Porsche, or the immigration politics of "neutral" Canada that offered quiet and comfort to many German war criminals. The author thus exposes numerous layers of the "hidden legacy" of the Holocaust. By making those uncomfortable parallels, she warns us against widespread totalitarian practices of modern societies, in which fascism, nationalism and xenophobia are still present. These pathologies, disguised as local stories of violence, are manifested in the novel in the story of M.K., a Serbian friend of Konrad's, who is deported from Pristina in a manner resembling World War II deportation practices.

Drdnić's ventures into the past are meant to describe the present. "Identity, tradition, memory, forgetting − they all recall the past, interpret the present and anticipate the future," Ewa Rewers aptly notices (Rewers, 2000: 111). In the context of Drdnić's project, one can risk a statement that looking back is not a regressive gesture; quite conversely, it makes possible looking ahead. Her writing can be interpreted as an attempt at diagnosing the present as well as a warning sign for the future. The Holocaust in her prose occurs at the level of historical memory (Konrad as a descendant of a survivor; the motif is also present in the biographies of other characters), as an icon signalling other acts of violence (the Kosovo War or the Balkan War of 1991-1995). It also stands for the moral norm. Although Drdnić's novels

are immersed in the context of her biography, ethnicity and nation, her writing is universal in that—through a wide spectrum of references − it never ceases to reflect on the human condition in general, beyond the Balkans' history.

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In my interpretation of the three novels, I hoped to point to a plausible network of problems which should be further discussed with the help of a much broader set of cultural texts produced after 1991 in the countries of former Yugoslavia, other cultural contexts and a more complex analysis of the recent theories emerging from the burgeoning field of memory studies. What should be further elaborated on is the relation of the texts not only to the past but also to the literary fields in which they function. The reading of memory work can be a point of departure for a much broader, comparative and interdisciplinary, project of examining the newest literature from the former Yugoslav region in the new anthropological light.

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