

Anna Witeska-Młynarczyk

# Evoking Polish Memory

State, Self and the Communist Past in Transition



PETER LANG  
EDITION

# Introduction

## Landscapes of Polish memory

This book is about landscapes of memory, as they have been collectively realized in a historical time of one Polish town - Marianowice<sup>1</sup> - by some of its inhabitants. Marianowice's landscape and the memories held by the people who live in it convey a sense of altered and ruptured history subject to numerous reconstructions. Conflicting commemorative inscriptions pile up on the buildings in which people's thoughts manage to make sense of the seemingly contradictory. The historical period I focus on encompasses WWII, its aftermath, the communist era, and the transition from communism to democracy, suggesting an association with Howard Hodgkin's paintings in which layers are painted over layers, never fully erased, always unveiling seemingly forgotten details of past social situations. The subject of this manuscript concerns the recent collective efforts to conventionalize and disambiguate the complex communist past undertaken in Poland, particularly during the years of my fieldwork, from 2006 to 2008. The complexity of the collective appropriation of historical process is visible in many corners of the town, in the ways in which people move within it or in narratives passed on in the locality. In line with Siobhan Kattago's (2013) view of memory and representation of the past in contemporary Europe, my ethnographic case shows Poland as a space where a plurality of memories and narratives about the recent past start to branch out. The painting of new layers in the landscape and in the people's minds is a political process comprising collectively enacted efforts by variously aligned social actors differently positioned vis-à-vis the centres of power and holding to divergent narratives about the past. This work takes as its subject matter political processes in which new collectively-built frameworks became objectified and legitimized through institutionalized state channels, eventually proving consequential for the psychologies of two different groups of people, as well as bringing visible change to the landscapes in which they live. The described policies are not characterized by stability as, like society at large, the political elites in Poland are divided on the question of what to do with the legacy of communism.

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1 Marianowice is an invented name given to real places – a Polish town of approximately 400.000 inhabitants and the surrounding areas. I chose to anonymize the area and the people. The historical sources used in the book are also anonymized so as not to reveal the identities. I explain the reasoning behind this decision later on in the introduction.

The years of the communist regime in Poland were abundant in violent transgressions of varying intensity, directed particularly at those who politically opposed the pro-Soviet establishment. The structure of the security police<sup>2</sup> was created in order to immobilize those who imagined that the state in which they lived should have been different and who stood up for this belief. The methods used by the security forces involved harsh repressions, both physical and psychological. During the Stalinist period, the security forces used brutal methods of elimination, imprisonment, torture and psychological repression. From the 1960s onwards, the invigilation of Polish society became more discreet; yet, with every social upheaval, the communist party tightened its control and often used violence against crowds and individuals. Eventually, in the winter of 1981, the newly-imposed martial law turned the social life of the country into a military-controlled project that lasted nearly 20 months. The changes in the global political order, the emergence of *Solidarity*, and the gradual dissolution of the Soviet bloc paved the way for the processes of political reconstruction. In 1989, the communist party leaders, the *Solidarity* activists and members of the Catholic Church sat around a table to agree on a new direction for the nation. It was the first step towards a social and political transition<sup>3</sup>.

This research, conducted nearly two decades after the collapse of a violent regime, was designed to explore the current perspectives of two groups: those who performed acts of resistance during communism, and who are now involved in the moral modes of defining the past, present and their own position in the framework of national history; and those who worked in the communist apparatus of repression, and who have been undergoing symbolic processes of exclusion in post-communist Poland<sup>4</sup>. I wanted to examine the ways in which the individuals portrayed in this book came to interpret the recent past. One can appreciate that these subjects and their involvement in the collectively realized actions are oriented to achieving coherence in their life-worlds, unavoidably nest-

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2 For the state of historical research and interesting references to works devoted to the communist apparatus of repression in Poland see F. Musiał (2006).

3 For a more detailed account of the history of the People's Republic of Poland (Polska Republika Ludowa, PRL), see for example D. Stola, M. Zaremba (eds) "PRL – trwanie i zmiana" (2003); interesting and thorough analyses of the social and political aspects of the transition from communism towards democracy in Poland can be found, for example, in: P. Śpiewak "Pamięć po komunizmie" (2005), J. Staniszkis "Post-communism: the emerging enigma" (1999) or "Postkomunizm: próba opisu" (2001).

4 Among my informants there were people who worked for the Internal Security Corps (Korpus Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego, KBW), the Security Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Urząd Bezpieczeństwa, UB changed in 1956 into Służba Bezpieczeństwa, SB) and a state police institution (Milicja Obywatelska, MO).

ed in the local landscape configuration that relies on the shifting power structures, semiotic and material resources, and individual psychologies. When designing the research, I believed that working with both groups, defined by the actions of the current state as heroes/victims<sup>5</sup> and perpetrators, would allow the emergence of a more complete account of the symbolic and moral transition of a nation composed of various individual dramas. People who stood unevenly on different sides of the barricade in the past have been subjected to the moral practices of affirmation and denial in today's polity. I view their fates as necessarily entangled and complementary, even if conflicting. If, while analyzing the acknowledged lives, one simultaneously looks into the denied ones, the picture gains more depth. One is able to see a background and a foreground at the same time, a perspective that is so easily abandoned, especially when the framing has a moral overtone. In this manuscript, I look at the consequences of the changing projects, authored by the Polish elites, of settling accounts with the past, which oscillated between extremes, and argue that the lack of clear and consequential historical policy led to the unpacking of troublesome individual memories while never fully incorporating them into the symbolic sphere. Such a situation brings no solid resolution, and it may distort the process of building a stable narrative about the self, one's past, and its relevance for the wider community.

## Setting and methods

The first part of the book speaks about the heroes/victims. I use this term to denote those who were involved in anti-communist activity, and who were repressed for such engagements during the undemocratic regime; they have since experienced official recognition in post-communist Poland as victims of communism and have at the same time been publicly acknowledged as national heroes. Suffering and heroism is a well-grounded topos in Polish culture. Those who experienced repression during communism are publicly acknowledged as victims and are seen as people whose dignity and integrity was violated in the political context. At the same time, since they resisted and suffered in the name of the nation, their deeds are considered heroic and they are represented as indomitable heroes. A large number of people in Marianowice fall into this category. Thousands are members of various associations of victims, veterans, combatants and former *Solidarity* activists. In order to ground my work, I chose to work closely with one particular association – the Association of the Former Prisoners of the Communist Period in Marianowice. The first five chapters should be read as a consequence of my engagement in the workings of this asso-

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5 I explain why I use name hero/victim later on in the chapter.

ciation. I visited the associational office on a weekly basis. I participated in the rituals and commemorative events with them. I read the files collected by the state security authorities concerning certain subgroups and persons in the association. Eventually, I undertook some more in-depth work with eighteen individuals. These were mostly men repressed during the Stalinist period. For my methodology, I relied on participant observation, recordings of naturally occurring conversations, recordings of commemorative events, written assignments, interviews, historical records and other official documents made available to me in the course of interaction with my informants and used as contextual material for understanding their stories.

The second part of this study is concerned with the former officers employed in the communist apparatus of repression<sup>6</sup>. I managed to work extensively with a generation of functionaries who worked in the state security authorities in the 1960s. I also reached a few individuals who worked for the regime at its outset. I used a snowball technique to gain access to this category of informants. I conducted in-depth interviews with eight officers of the Ministry of Interior Affairs. The most far-reaching material I gathered concerns an officer accused of committing a *communist crime*, and who underwent a trial during my fieldwork. I used the trial situation to gain a dual victim-perpetrator perspective on this particular case. I interviewed a couple of witnesses on both sides, and I also worked closely with the defendant and with the main prosecution witness. I attended most of the hearings. The trial allowed me to gain access to the group of heroes/victims who belonged to *Solidarity*, and who were repressed in the 1980s. Apart from the trial, my work with the former security officers focused on eliciting their life narratives and probing, through conversation, various topics connected to the past and to the present.

This work attempts to give a sense of the ways in which these two differently positioned groups of people belonging to the same nation/state - the former anti-communist activists repressed for their political involvements and the former officers of the state security authorities - try collectively and internally to negotiate a sense of justice and keep a coherent image of the communist past in the circumstances of the revival of memory politics and attempts to account for

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6 I use here various names when talking about the communist apparatus of repression, i.e. forces used under the Polish communist state for fighting the widely understood opposition and for pacifying society (Musiał 2006:7). Historians disagree about how to name such an apparatus. Some argue that “security apparatus” is a proper name, while some prefer “apparatus of repression” or “apparatus of terror” (see Musiał 2006:8). Refraining from evaluation, I will use names such as the state security forces or authorities, the apparatus of repression, the secret police, the security apparatus or security officers interchangeably.

past crimes in contemporary Poland. Above all, the dual construction was meant to allow space for the illustration of divergent perspectives and affective reactions to socially conditioned situatedness vis-à-vis one's past. The position of each of these groups is different. One used to be on the recognized and privileged side of the state pantheon but, with the transition, moved into the sphere of excluded subjects; the other used to be repressed but is now gaining a momentum of recognition and affirmation<sup>7</sup>.

I conducted the research mainly among men. While, among the heroes/victims, I met and interviewed women informants, among the former security officers I worked exclusively with male informants. This book should hence be read as an ethnography of particular experiences of manhood nested in nationalist and communist ideologies and realized in the milieu of specific social groups and their complex histories. Recent scholarship has explored the idea that memory is gendered, meaning that there are differences between the ways in which women and men remember the past (Leydesdorff, Passerini and Thomson 2009:1). The socio-linguistic approach, for instance, reveals differences at the level of speech, i.e. it tracks the differences in usage of grammatical constructions in personal narratives, arguing that women and men construct the stories about the same past differently (Ely and McCabe 2009). These differences are believed to be caused by differences in the life experiences of men and women, taking on different social roles and functioning in divergent social contexts and settings, e.g. the tendencies of men to dominate public life and of women to focus on family and household (Leydesdorff, Passerini and Thomson 2009:1). My informants, especially the members of the Association, belong to generations in which male and female spheres remain well defined and separated. I noticed this during visits to the heroes/victims' homes, where I was greeted by their wives who served us with tea and cookies but never sat together with us while I was recording. In the case of the former security officers, the wives would be 'protected' from any knowledge about their professional duties. This was exemplified by Janek who, during my fieldwork, underwent a trial, having been accused

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7 As will become apparent later, the picture is a bit more complex. The communist state and its functionaries were not unambiguously condemned and excluded in the post-communist condition. This is a large group of people and a lot of dividing lines cut through it. E.g., the ex-functionaries of the security apparatus feel betrayed by the communist leaders. On the other hand, the recognition for the heroes/victims feels bittersweet because of the economic prosperity of the nomenklatura in today's Poland, especially when compared to the economic hardship experienced by many of the heroes/victims. Hence, despite occupying their own pantheon, the heroes/victims do not particularly feel like winners.

of a communist crime, and did not share this experience with his wife. 'I simply do not talk to her about it' - he told me.

I often asked myself what I might have discovered had I approached this project from an alternative viewpoint - that of women. Time did not allow me to explore both viewpoints sufficiently. The logic of ethnographic research implies constant decision-making about what to follow and what to ignore (Sanjek 2003:299). My choice was to follow men, rather than women, because this is what fitted my research timeframe and the way in which the interactions with my informants unfolded. While an ethnography of female, middle-ranking officers, for example, would have made for a fascinating journey, I did not reach a single woman via the snowball effect technique I used. Within the Association of the heroes/victims, women were present, yet their world was self-contained and lived backstage, compared to the front of the stage occupied by the men. The *embodiment of gender* was nonetheless visible in the usage of associational space where women often clustered around a tiny pantry serving tea or coffee, preparing food for an occasion, talking mainly to each other, and never really taking part in loud male exchanges on recent politics or history. They hardly ever wore uniforms or carried standards during official rituals, although they were always there to help with a glass of water. They wrote poems from their past experience rather than autobiographical narratives, they ran the associational newsletter, and they were usually more modest than the men about their deeds and accomplishments.

Thinking about gender and memory, Sherna Berger Gluck warns researchers against collecting gendered stories 'naively on a sense of gender solidarity' (cited after Leydesdorff: IX). Gender is no longer treated as a hegemonic category; it is seen as flexible and changeable. 'Masculinity and femininity take different forms in different cultural settings' (Leydesdorff, Passerini and Thomson 2009:1), and within each gender there is great variety, allowing the display of gendered identities (Leydesdorff, Passerini and Thomson 2009:2). This ethnography describes two groups of men whose different positions enable each of them to remember the past and experience their manhood while evoking that past in the present. In the context of memory politics, their gendered identities gained another dimension in which they were performed and produced. The masculinity of these men became partially defined in a public sphere and exposed vis-à-vis particular audiences (e.g. in an official commemorative ritual or in a court). Catherine Kohler Riessman notes how 'respondents narrativize particular experiences in their lives, often where there has been a breach between ideal and real, self and society' (1993:3). The men with whom I worked in this project, who have taken up new social positions as a result of the political transition, were preoccupied in their narratives with piecing together the ideal, the re-

al, and the self-demanded or socially-imposed. A hero/victim publicly depicted as a brave and honourable soldier with no stains or shadows has to find ways of incorporating more ambiguous experiences of being a man who 'did not manage to be adamant at all times' (see chapter five). Walking with standards and receiving medals and military promotions, he has to work out a selective narrative that favours those memories that prove he was a man, a role he performs in a public square. The second-generation security officers, on the other hand, try in their narratives to rescue the sense of masculinity that had been fed by the 'bureaucracy of terror' in the past. For them, being a man meant having flair, being cunning, being able to stomach brutality, being professional, and being powerful. They take a defensive stand, realizing that these attitudes are now socially condemned. As will become apparent from the narratives, the political transition irritated the gendered aspect of the identities of both groups of men.

The manuscript attempts to pin down the notion of memory on various levels of social reality - from legal aspects of the memory project to embodied experience of remembering. It views memory as a multidimensional figure the depth of which is given by social configurations of power, collective objectifying practices, diversity of historically established cultural vehicles, and individual life histories backed up by fantasies, fears and desires. The main aim of this research was to understand ways in which people negotiate and incorporate a hero/victim and a perpetrator identity into their self-schemata and how this influences their psychologies. The plural form of the noun 'landscape' in the title of the introduction is intended to signal the plurality of embodied interactive practices of memory, and their conflicting characters.

Since the book is part of a historical series, I wish to devote some space to explaining the philosophy of anthropological research and the reasons for anonymizing the sources and the people. A historian may feel troubled by the question of how to verify the arguments and knowledge presented in this text if the sources are not given. It is hoped that the commentary on the nature of anthropological work and a specific case, in particular the explanation of its ethical dimension, will facilitate the evaluation of this work and help the reader to approach it with openness.

For anthropologists, it is the fieldwork experience that makes the research 'anthropological' (Amit 2000: 1). Unlike methods used in other disciplines, going into the field is understood as a social experience and a 'total experience' (Amit 2000: 1). Its shape depends on the 'conceptual, professional, financial and relational opportunities and resources accessible to the ethnographer' who engages his/her intellectual, physical, emotional, political and intuitive capital to learn about cultural worlds of particular people (Amit 2000: 6, 1). As such, the fieldwork experience is characterized by instability. Anthropological research is

called a ‘messy qualitative experience’ because of its dynamism and unpredictability. This kind of research implies a constant shifting of position between people, social situations, identities and perspectives. In fact, the circumstances often define the choices and method rather than *vice versa* (Amit 2000: 11). A wide range of methodological techniques can be integrated in ethnographic research (e.g. use of empathy, casual conversations, interviews, life histories, recording of collective expressions of local cultures such as myths, songs or rituals etc.). The choice depends on the appropriateness of a particular technique for the studied topic, the practical possibility of applying it in the field, and the theoretical views of the researcher (Salzman 2002:549). Michael Carrithers points out that fieldwork ‘may take as many forms as there are anthropologists, projects and circumstances’ (2002: 350). Ethnographic research is about the ways in which ‘a series of unplanned encounters’ make the ethnographer understand the people he/she is studying (Bradburd 1998: XVI). The ethnographer’s paramount aim is ‘to listen, and to move as quickly as possible into natural settings of social life, the places people would be, doing what they would be doing, if the ethnographer was not there’ (Sanjek 2000: 299). This approach grants openness and flexibility to what ends up as a very individualistic and interactive research process. Its strength lies in the ethnographer’s ability to ‘respond and adapt to social circumstances as these arise, to be open to a wide variety of different types of relationships and interactions’ (Amit 2000: 10). The main qualification ascribed to a good ethnographer is his/her capacity to imaginatively enter into other people’s lives (Carrithers 2002: 351). As Peter Metcalf puts it, ‘it remains the case that anthropologists get out and around the world in ways that other scholars do not’ (2005: 183). As a consequence, many contemporary anthropologists ‘prefer to avoid claims of practicing science’ (Metcalf 2005: 183). In a humanistic vision of conducting anthropology, which I share, the goal is emphatically to grasp the studied people’s way of thinking, to create a qualitative account that reflects both the researcher and those studied, while the ethnography itself remains one of many possible interpretations (Salzman 2002:552).

Naturally, there emerges the question of how to assess the accuracy of the material presented in such ethnography. Discussions about methodology are not very ‘popular’ among anthropologists (Salzman 2002:552). Nevertheless, a toolkit is available to help us discuss the validity of an ethnographic representation. Firstly, Roger Sanjek suggests that ethnographers should be ‘honest about their role and sponsorship’ (2002:299). This will give the research a certain transparency and explain some of the choices made by the researcher. Further, he talks about theoretical openness, i.e. the openness with which the ethnographer discusses theory, explicitly depicts his/her fieldwork path (e.g. number of informants, type of relationships developed during fieldwork, ways of gathering

data), and provides information about the fieldwork evidence itself, i.e. remains clear about relationships of note and records for the final text (Sanjek 2002:302). Similarly, Daniel Bradburd suggests that the way to achieve validity is to ‘show how being there creates ethnographic understanding’. He proposes that the ethnographer should expose the sources he/she used in order to understand the studied people (1998: XVII). Michael Angronsino expresses similar but more developed suggestions that may be helpful in evaluating anthropological works: 1/ evaluate how conclusions relate to the gathered material; 2/ look at the coherence of the research process (i.e. how long did the researcher spend in the field, what methods did he/she use, were they properly chosen etc.?); 3/ access its internal accuracy - to what extent does the argument seem reasonable?; 4/ access its external accuracy - can the research be used in a comparative framework?; 5/ assess whether the author openly discusses the research ethics. Another helpful technique mentioned by Angronsino for making the research more credible is triangulation, i.e. usage of diverse methodologies in the course of inquiry (2010: 116-117). Wishing to give the reader an opportunity to evaluate this work on anthropological terms, I openly discuss methodology, theory and my own positionality. I also try to show in each chapter how the theory that inspired me maintains a dialogue with the empirical findings. Last, but not least, I discuss the difficult ethical dimension of this work.

Since ethnographic research implies the development of close relationships between the researcher and the researched subjects, the emphasis on the ethical dimension of research remains central for anthropologists. For this research, I was guided by the ethical guidance of the European Anthropological Association and the Ethics Commission at University College London, where this project was carried out. The research was developed in accordance with the Data Protection Act binding in the UK. The Act aims to protect human research subjects against abuses (Angronsino 2010: 161). According to *the Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice* prepared by the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth, an ethnographer is obliged to respect and protect the research participants from harm. Such protection implies the following: protecting the physical, social and psychological wellbeing of the participants; respecting their rights, interests, sensitivities and privacy; anticipating harm and protecting the research participants against any potentially harmful effects of the research. This obliges anthropologists to be aware of the intrusive potential of some of their enquiries and methods and to negotiate informed consent and leave open the right to confidentiality and anonymity.

Among the people who entrusted me with their thoughts during the research process, I met many who were concerned about revealing their identity and making their thoughts publicly available in the form of an academic manuscript.

I used consent forms before each interview, allowing the interviewee to decide whether his identity would be revealed or not. I informed each person about the aim and content of the research and the possible consequences of participating in it. I also made it clear that each person was free to end the research relationship at any time without giving a reason, or to change his/her decision about the use of their name or narrative before the field research was completed. Among the ex-functionaries of the security apparatus, only one person felt comfortable about the use of his name. A few of the heroes/victims did not wish the research to reveal their identities, but the majority wanted the research to show both their personal details and ‘the truth’. Because the stories of those who consented to the disclosure of their identities overlap, intersect and feed into the narratives of those who did not, and because both groups are often linked by the same events and documents, I decided that, in order to comply with the ethical guidelines, the best solution was to anonymize everything - personal details, place names and catalogue numbers of historical records used in the text. This decision was a natural consequence of my professional commitment to the anthropological ethical code and my overriding aim of protecting the people with whom I worked. As an anthropologist, I consider the interests of the research participants a priority.

Readers may feel that anonymity removes any possibility of verifying my arguments. It is worth keeping in mind that, had I not anonymized my sources, I would not have been able to produce the most interesting parts of this work. Even today, people in Poland need a guarantee of confidentiality, a comfortable trust zone in which to expose their hesitations and versions of the communist past. Later in the text, I try to explain why each group feels insecure talking about the past in non-conventionalized ways, i.e. how their fears are conditioned. The history of the People’s Republic of Poland and the memories of it have been fairly well researched in sociological and historical terms as well as from the perspective of political science. An ethnographic study focusing on subjectivity and ways in which individual and social regimes of memory interact opens up new possibilities for understanding what is actually happening when historical policy is being implemented. I hope that my narrative will open up a space for a new discussion and that it will bring human beings to the forefront of the debate about memory politics.

To facilitate the verification of my theses in non-anthropological terms, I have made available excerpts from field notes, recordings of interviews and public events, catalogue numbers of the files used but anonymized in the book, and some of the visual material used for analysis by handing them into the Archives

of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw<sup>8</sup>. The research material is ordered by chapters - as it was used for supporting the arguments developed in each section. It can be accessed by members of academia on condition that no identities and personal details included in the package are given away.

## Anthropology of the end

This ethnography draws upon John Borneman's project of an 'anthropology of the end in political authority' (2004), as it focuses on the historical moment of social reconfigurations in the Polish modes of self-representation after a specific authoritarian regime had been brought to an end. The collapse of communism in Poland should be regarded as a local element of a larger process of dissolution of the Cold War system expressed through the dismantling of authoritative right-wing and left-wing regimes and the assimilation of a democratic and more humanistic political agenda. The emergence of the post-Cold War era judicial solutions, described by Bernard Schlink as a period of 'revolutionary justice', constituted a larger transcontinental process (cited after Borneman 1997:7; compare Mink, Neumayer 2013). Such political transformations imply the necessity of dealing with the wicked aspects of the collapsed state forms. Different localities and communities implemented various solutions for representing the violent past and accounting for it. The implemented solutions have been largely dependent on political culture, configurations of power, various groups' entitlement to power, and their access to institutionalized tools of state control through which the politics of memory are shaped. Ethnographies from around the world give examples of ways in which various societies have moved from undemocratic regimes to more democratic political forms (e.g. Amadiume et al. 2000; Barnouw 2005; Bucur 2009; Pine, Kaneff, Haukanes 2004; Ross 2001; Skultans 2001; Smith 2009; Stern 2006; Wilson 2000).

In all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where the political transformation occurred, a public discussion on the communist legacy surfaced and some forms of transitional justice were adapted. Georges Mink and Laure Neumayer note that 'in all European countries the numbers of legally and normatively framed "memory politics" are increasing' (2013: 25). They indicate that the general tendency has involved de-communization of state bureaucracy and edu-

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8 <http://www.petea.home.pl/apan/>; the file can be found under the reference number *księga nabytków 2694*. The material given to the archive is ordered by chapters; thus, interested academics can go straight to the recordings, photos or field notes supporting the arguments presented in particular chapters, but not to specific fragments. The interview files bear the same names as the people in the book.