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## **Cultural Topographies of the Holocaust and Identity. On The Semantics of Emptiness in the Contemporary Polish and German Literature**

There are many types of emptiness<sup>1</sup> and many meanings to it. Much of the content is hidden in the apparent vacuum. The nothing is powerful as it always results from something, and most often from a loss—more or less conscious, causing pain and loneliness. The loss may, however, be tantamount to disposing of something. Initially, it brings relief and an illusory feeling of liberation, but over time it becomes replaced by remorse and the need for redress which we try to meet by reconstructing the lost reality. It is a story about own experiences or those of the community that orders the past and brings it out of the abyss of oblivion only to give it the status of the most important element that (co-)constitutes the identity. The literary space is the space, together with all the faces of emptiness that fills it, where this story is fully realised.

In Aleida Assmann's (German researcher) theory of German memory cultures, writing acts as an omnipotent metaphor of memory<sup>2</sup>, and

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<sup>1</sup>In her latest study on the ways and means of shaping emptiness, Christine Dissmann, a German researcher in urban space, distinguishes two main types of emptiness: material, present in such forms as emptiness of content, structure, intentionally created, functional and humane, and non-material, including semantic emptiness, as well as informational, event-oriented and metaphorical. See Ch. Dissmann, *Die Gestaltung der Leere. Zum Umgang mit einer neuen städtischen Wirklichkeit*, Bielefeld 2011, pp. 30-42. I call upon this typology because some of its elements will serve as a starting point for the analysis of literary representations of emptiness in the remaining part of the article.

<sup>2</sup>A. Assmann, *Erinnerungsraume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedachtnisses*, Munich 1999, p. 48. Due to its characteristics (spatiality and visuality), the metaphor of writing combines the properties of two basic metaphors, which date back to ancient traditions, describing memory and the way it operates: they are relatively "warehouse" whose content, stored in the form of past impressions and experience, await to be recognized, interpreted and

literature, i.e. the culture sub-system consisting of texts<sup>3</sup> understood as cultural artifacts and specific media offer, plays—according to Assmann’s theory continuator Birgit Neumann—a particular role as a central memory generation medium. Having the freedom to shape imaginative space, it provides innovative perspectives to view the prevailing concepts of identity and visions of the past.<sup>4</sup> Hence this article, aiming to show the relationship between identity and the so-called cultural topographies<sup>5</sup> of the Holocaust, turns to literary fiction, which—in contrast to other memory media—enjoy specific privileges: they create the illusion that we directly generate the past, revealing at the same time strategies to construct its various versions. Literary texts can be regarded as sites of memory of some kind. This is possible due to the fact that in the form of cultural objectification they facilitate the transmission of past collective perceptions of reality, and thus

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given meaning by carving them into “a wax tablet”—in this context a symbol of the process of remembrance and remembering. See G. Butzer, *Metaforyka pamięci (Metaphorics of Memory)*, [in:] M. Saryusz-Wolska (Ed.), *Pamięć zbiorowa i kulturowa. Współczesna perspektywa niemiecka (Collective and Cultural Memory. The Contemporary German Perspective)*, Kraków 2009, pp. 185-209 (orig. ed.: *Gedachtnismetaphorik*, [in:] A. Erll, A. Nünning, (Hrsg.), *Gedächtniskonzepte der Literaturwissenschaft*, Berlin 2005, pp. 11-30, here: p. 15).

<sup>3</sup> Doris Bachmann-Medick uses the notion of culture as text, derived from the theory of semiotics of culture (created in connection with the so-called. *Interpretative Turn* in the 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and encompassing culture as a system of symbolic signs) in her work on the anthropological turn of cultural studies and literature studies. Therefore, she shows to be a continuator of C. Geertz’s theory; he supports interpretative anthropology. On the one hand, Bachmann-Medick treats the notion as a metaphor describing the fact that culture is a set of cultural texts, and hence that go beyond the spoken or written word (she includes rituals, theatre, gestures, celebrations), and the metaphor itself aims to allow access to the processes of self-description by a community (only when we treat social activities, events and interactions as cultural texts, do they become available in the cultural process of meaning objectification); on the other hand, the researcher sees in it the research program characterized by interdisciplinarity in defining research issues, diversity of interpretation and a shift from referential text hermeneutics to studying power relations based on discourse theory. See D. Bachmann-Medick, *Kultur als Text: Die anthropologische Wende in der Kulturwissenschaft*, Tübingen 2004; D. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 2006.

<sup>4</sup> See B. *Literatur, Erinnerung, Identität*, [in:] A. Erll, A. Nünning (Hrsg.), *op. cit.*, pp. 149-178, here: p. 164; B. Neumann, *Literatur als Medium kollektiver Erinnerung und Identitäten*, [in:] A. Erll u.a. (Hrsg.), *Literatures - Erinnerung - Identität: Theoriekonzeptionen und Fallstudien*, Trier 2003, pp. 49-78, here: p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> The term was proposed by Berlin cultural studies scholar Hartmut Böhme while delivering an interdisciplinary project focused on topographical representations of space in literature. This concept will be presented in detail later in this article. See H. Böhme (Hrsg.), *Topographien der Literatur: Deutsche Literatur im transnationalen Kontext*, Metzler, Stuttgart/Weimar 2005.

constitute the past and become the foundation of self-awareness of group members.<sup>6</sup> Their operation within cultures memory cultures takes place at both the intra- and extra-textual levels.

A culture studies oriented analysis<sup>7</sup> is carried out on novels which have been penned in recent years by authors both in Polish and German. Some of them belong to the second or third generation after the Holocaust (Piotr Paziński, Minka Pradelski), some attempt to tackle the issue of identity in the context of Holocaust experience from the point of view of the so-called intellectual witness (Tadeusz Słobodzianek, Ewa Andrzejewska, Iris Hanika). These texts differ considerably not only because of the story they tell, but also because of the perspective from which this is done. What they have in common, however, is the emptiness whose different semantic variants each text represents, and the goal of this article is to uncover them. Before that, however, a few theoretical remarks concerning the relationship between memory, space and identity will be discussed.

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Contemporary theoretical discourse on identity breaks with substantial understanding of reality, and thus identity. This is connected to the impact of the so-called *linguistic turn*, which in the 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century defined language, as a synchronous system of symbolic characters, as the principal

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<sup>6</sup> See A. Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen. Eine Einführung*, Metzler, Stuttgart 2005, p. 147.

<sup>7</sup> The cultural studies focus in literature studies is a concept created in the 80s of the last century during many theoretical debates within the humanities and social sciences. It is considered to be a result of the so-called *cultural turn*, individual various disciplines continually approaching each other. A characteristic feature of this paradigm is an attempt to investigate the so-called cultural experience and to compare different cultures with one another, with culture defined in the semiotic spirit as a universe of texts which is accessible only through the symbolic context and semantic connection (contextualisation is considered the methodological basis of culturally-oriented literature studies). The main research directions include—apart from historical anthropology, media culture, religion studies combined with the study of myths, ethnology (with a particular emphasis on *cultural studies*)—the study of cultures of memory, to identify causes of the continuation or breakdown of identity concepts in the dynamics of cultural change, whose cultural interpretation is provided in literary texts. Hence, it appears that this particular paradigm is the most accurate in the context of the considerations here. See: D. Bachmann-Medick, *Kultur als Text*, H. Böhme, K. Scherpe (Hrsg.), *Literatur und Kulturwissenschaften: Positionen, Theorien, Modelle*, Rowohlt-Taschenbuch-Verlag, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1996; A. Erll, *Was ist kulturwissenschaftliche Literaturwissenschaft: Was ist ... Und zu Welchem Ende ...?*, [in] *Kulturwissenschaftliche Literaturwissenschaft*, A. Nünning (Hrsg.), Tübingen 2004, pp. 115-128.

factor structuring reality. As a result, reality is understood as a system of representations and variations which people construct using symbols.<sup>8</sup> The constructive function of identity reinforces the fact that it is created in the process of narration of past experiences, organizing scraps of memories into a coherent story, and thus clothing them with sense by interpreting the past from the perspective of current needs.<sup>9</sup> This applies to both its individual and collective dimension. Assuming that it is created as a result of the work of memory, it must not be forgotten that the shape of each individual memory is affected by the so-called social memory framework<sup>10</sup> which, according to a French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, give it a concrete structure in the process of selection and perspectivism in accordance with the current needs of a given community. Individuals are the basic objects of memory, but its actions are based on socially determined selection of specific elements from the resources available to those individuals. These processes would not be possible without social interaction in the form of communication during which the proper symbolic order of a given group is transmitted.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, collective identity is seen as a result of supra-individual

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<sup>8</sup> See D. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural turns*, pp. 8-9 and 34-37.

<sup>9</sup> German historian and literary, philosopher and literature studies scholar Jörn Rüsen is one of the main theorists of historical narrative as a way to make sense of past events. He sees in it an elementary cultural form of experience, thinking, communicating and creating identity (the latter arises due to the fact its subjects realise the impact of passage of time on the process of organizing memories, which gives meaning to the story). See J. Rüsen, *Zeit und Sinn. Strategien des historischen Denkens*, Frankfurt am Main 1990, pp. 18, 157-164. The fact that every story about the past is only one kind of its interpretation and not an accurate reflection stems from the need to pursue a perspective from which the story is constructed. This choice is usually dictated by the contemporary situation and the needs of the subject who performs auto-definition through the story. The story of the past, thus, becomes *de facto* a story about the present. For the narration of memories as interpretation and anthropological mode of constructing identity see: K. Rosner, *Narracja, Tożsamość i Czas (Narrative, Identity and Time)*, Universitas, Kraków 2006, p. 116; B. Neumann, *Literatur, Erinnerung, Identität*, p. 150 on; H. Welzer, *Das soziale Gedächtnis: Geschichte, Erinnerung, Tradierung*, Hamburg 2001, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> See M. Halbwachs, *Společne ramy paměci (The Social Framework of Memory)*, trans. M. Król, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Polish sociologist Barbara Szacka proposed a definition collective memory in the spirit of Durkheim's vision of the social world (Halbwachs was a student of Durkheim) according to which it is synonymous with the "idea[s] about the past of own group, constructed by individuals from the information stored by them. They are understood, selected and transformed according to their own cultural standards and world views. These standards are, however, established socially, and thus common to the members of a given community. This leads to the unification of ideas about the past, and thus allows to talk about the collective memory of the history of own group" (B. Szacka, *Czas przeszły, pamięć i mit (Past Time, Memory and Myth)*, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Wyd. Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warsaw 2006, p. 44).

memory, which is the starting point for a structured practice of interpreting the past shared by all members the community.<sup>12</sup>

This practice takes the form of rituals designed to nurture memories associated with a site and dependent on a specific time. Contemporary German sociologist Bernard Giesen defines these rituals as traditional codes<sup>13</sup> for producing a group self-image, and the self-image is a construct composed of matrix narratives of the past which take the form of cultural symbolisations.<sup>14</sup> Those symbolisations, being canonical texts objectified and shared by all members of a group, constitute part of the cultural memory as understood by Jan Assmann<sup>15</sup> and refer to specific events belonging to a common history. A collection of memories, fixed and culturally shaped in this way, exists in the form of memory statues among which Assmann lists canonical texts, rituals, monuments, as well as social activities such as visits to sites of memory or observation.<sup>16</sup> A feeling of social belonging evolves from the participation in the common practice of interpretation and explanation of the past and hence collective identity. National identity is of its special kind, which in the light of recent research on nationalism has lost the status of unchanging greatness for historicity and constructivism. It is

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<sup>12</sup> B. Neumann, *Literatur als Medium kollektiver Erinnerung*, p. 49.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to traditional codes of collective identity production whose rules of behavior, traditions and the so-called social routine are familiar to the members of a group, and which also include locality beside the mentioned rituals of memory (based on communication processes), Giesen lists primordial codes, such as gender, generationality, kinship, origin, ethnicity and race, and universalistic codes related to the idea of salvation or *parousia*. See B. Giesen, *Kollektive Identität: Die Intellektuellen und die Nation 2*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt on Main 1999, pp. 32-54.

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 18-25.

<sup>15</sup> About Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory see: J. Assmann, *Pamięć kulturowa. Pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość w cywilizacjach starożytnych* (*Cultural Memory. Writing, Remembering and Political Identity in Ancient Civilizations*), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warsaw 2008. It seems that Assmann's theory, due to its huge popularity in the past two decades and by extension a wide reception in Germany, has become a little better known to the Polish reader as well (see e.g.: J. Kałużny, *Kategoria pamięci zbiorowej w badaniach literaturoznawczych*, (*Category of Collective Memory in Literary Research*), "Kultura współczesna", No. 3(53), pp. 85-103; *Pamięć zbiorowa i kulturowa. Współczesna perspektywa niemiecka*, (*Collective and Cultural Memory. Contemporary German Perspective*), M. Saryusz-Wolska (ed.), Universitas, Kraków 2009; R. Traba, *Przeszłość w teraźniejszości. Polskie spory o historię na początku XXI wieku* (*The Past in the Present. Polish History Disputes of the Early 21st Century*), Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2009), its content will therefore not be discussed in detail at this point.

<sup>16</sup> J. Assmann, *Pamięć kulturowa* (*Cultural Memory*) (I used the original edition: *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, Baecker, Dirk, Bremen 1999, p. 38).

understood today first and foremost as a product of imagined communities, as a construct and an artifact that is created basing on specific rules of auto-presentation and is subject to historical change.<sup>17</sup> Nations appear to be invented products of the past (Hobsbawm already wrote of them as “invented traditions”<sup>18</sup>) and their biographies as narratives of collective identity that seek to either update the past, or historicise the present. Their continued presence in cultural discourse of a given society is characterised by certain and unchangeable symbolism.<sup>19</sup> This does not mean, however, that national identity takes on a homogeneous character: according to Giesen, the pluralism of nation’s own images is a phenomenon observed ever since the time of Romanticism, and is expressed by the existence of alternative nationalism discourses.<sup>20</sup> To conclude this topic, it should be stressed once again that national identity is not the only kind of collective identity: within a single culture we witness the coexistence of different memory cultures and identities which can be shaped not only on the basis of nationality, but also on e.g. religion, cultural gender, family or ethnicity. This leads to numerous conflicts and struggles for symbolic power.

A category of space came up in the background of the current discussion about the memory. Treated harshly in modernist discourse, it is now undergoing its renaissance<sup>21</sup>, also in the context of the theory of memory

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<sup>17</sup> See G. Essen, H. Turk (Hrsg.), *Unerledigte Geschichten: Der literarische Umgang mit Nationalität und Internationalität*, Göttingen 1999, pp. 12-22.

<sup>18</sup> See E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: programme, myth, reality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990.

<sup>19</sup> These are two of the five main features of national identities listed by German cultural studies scholar Dietrich Harth. The other features include the impossibility of empirical measuring of national identity and the fact that it provides a definition framework for a group’s auto-image and differentiate it from other groups. See. D. Harth, *Zerrissenheit: Der deutsche Idealismus und die Suche nach kultureller Identität*, [in:] J. Assmann, T. Hölscher, (Hrsg.), *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, Fr. n.M. 1988, pp. 220-264, here: p. 222.

<sup>20</sup> See B. Giesen, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> For about thirty years it is not possible to overlook the increased interest in the category of space in cultural studies research. The so-called *spatial turn*, coined by Edward Soja—a humanities geography representative—in the 80s of 20<sup>th</sup> century (this term appears for the first time in his study of 1989 “Postmodern Geographies”, but the role of paradigm is assigned to it by the researcher only in the work of 1996 *Third Space*) sees an exceptionally dynamic discussion over the works of such French thinkers as Michael Foucault or Henri Lefebvre. The former, already at the end of the 60s of 20<sup>th</sup> century, announced in one of his radio lectures the advent of the spatial era (replacing that whose main category of analysis was linear time) in which people begin to perceive themselves as beings connected with one another through particular bonds and thus forming a kind of network where it is not sequence of time that plays a major role, but simultaneity and spatial relations—see M. Foucault, *Inne przestrzenie (Of Other Spaces)*, “Second Texts”, 6/2005, pp. 117-125. Lefebvre, however, defined space as a



cultures. Indeed, memory maintains particularly close relations with space, which Krzysztof Pomian<sup>22</sup> was trying to point out three years ago, and about which Maurice Halbwachs<sup>23</sup> already wrote in the 30s of the last century. The French sociologist's theory, however, was not entirely novel in this context. In order to realise the long tradition of combining the two categories, it should suffice to recall the ancient legend of Simonides of Ceos,<sup>24</sup> so famous among the circles of cultural memory researchers, who first applied the mnemonic rules, giving rise to the so-called *ars memoria*.

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product of social processes which is not so much a scene or background to historical events as takes an active part in their creation and affects their shape, which makes it a mental, physical and also symbolic construct—see H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1991, pp. 410-411 (orig. title: *La production de l'espace*, Paris 1974). So there has occurred a shift from traditional, territorial and substantial understanding of space to perceiving it in terms of relationships or communication (social actors actively participate in its creation by taking social action and communication). That is why more and more we can find in discourse categories such as social space, virtual space, transnational or identity, which have little in common with the traditional, yet Aristotelian notion of space as a container. About the spatial turn and its impact within social sciences, culture studies and literature studies we can read in a number of studies of recent years, including D. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*, Ch. Berndt, R. Pütz (Hrsg.), *Kulturelle Geographien: zur Beschäftigung mit Raum und Ort nach dem Cultural Turn*, Bielefeld 2007; J. Döring, T. Thielmann (Hrsg.), *Spatial Turn: Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften*, Bielefeld 2008; S. Günzel, *Topologie: Zur Raumbeschreibung in den Kultur- und Medienwissenschaften*, Bielefeld, 2007; W. Hallet, B. Neumann (Hrsg.), *Raum und Bewegung in der Literatur*, Bielefeld 2009; M. Scáky, Ch. Leitgeb (Hrsg.), *Kommunikation — Gedächtnis — Raum: Kulturwissenschaften nach dem "Spatial Turn,"* Bielefeld 2009.

<sup>22</sup> He talked about this in his lecture opening a conference organised at the Royal Castle in Warsaw on 11-13 January 2008 by the Protection of Memory of Combat and Martyrdom Board as "Sites of Memory in Central and Eastern Europe. The experience of the past. The message for the future."

<sup>23</sup> In his second study on collective memory of 1939 he emphasized the dependency of memories on the site. He pictured the image of a union activist that recalls all places where he worked previously as he walks past the factory, all employment contracts and disputes with other workers. According to Halbwachs, a similar story happens to villagers in traditional agrarian societies whose memories are inextricably linked to the family estate and the place where they live and whose character does not change over time, which reinforces memories and stabilizes memory. Every family, every community arranges their surroundings in such a way as to make the items collected represent the past and by extension saved it from oblivion. Any external interference into the form of such a personalized world meets with resistance of its inhabitants. See M. Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* (1939), Albin Michel, Paris 1950 (unfortunately not translated into Polish; I used the German edition: M. Halbwachs, *Das kollektive Gedächtnis*, Enke, Stuttgart 1967, pp. 134-140).

<sup>24</sup> This legend, as A. Assmann claims, not only gives rise to a mnemotechnique, but also demonstrates the power of human memory: the power to overcome death and destruction. See A. Assmann, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

Mainstream new theories developed in the spirit of the *spatial turn*, which concern the relationship between the category of time and the category of space, focus on “writing the history of sites”—or so says Karl Schlögel, the author of a comprehensive study *In the space we read time. On history, civilisation and geopolitics*<sup>25</sup>. This approach faces strong criticism from the German historian as leading into a dead end street,<sup>26</sup> and the cliché phrase is deprived of its new paradigm dimension. Schlögel only wants to see in it an emphasis shift and an increased interest in space as a category that is not so much discovered, but simply noticed.<sup>27</sup> According to him, space has always been both the background and a significant factor in historical events (“Geschichte findet statt”). So it developed itself as well as it was its own construct. It is equivalent to the accumulated historical experience and reflects the overlapping layers of past events, like in a palimpsest, that were significant enough to imprint their mark in it and survived in its system. Similarly to Bakhtin’s chronotope,<sup>28</sup> two seemingly opposite categories come to melt together in the German researcher’s proposal. However, Schlögel places a particular emphasis on the material dimension of space and finds traces of past events in specific locations, which due to their materiality have the power to penetrate the mental sphere of community members.<sup>29</sup> Their reconstruction is carried out through topographical description of the reality.

The author of the concept representing another turn (considered to be one of the varieties of *spatial turn*) is Sigrid Weigel, who in 2002 announced the

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<sup>25</sup> K. Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit: Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München 2003. See the Polish edition: *W przestrzeni czas czytamy. O historii i geopolityce (In the Space We Read Time. On History and Geopolitics)*, trans. I Drozdowska and L. Musiał, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2009 (Poznańska Biblioteka Niemiecka, Vol 30).

<sup>26</sup> K. Schlögel, *Raume und Geschichte*, [in:] S. Günzel, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-52, here: p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> Schlögel devoted a chapter to a detailed reflexion on spatial turn in his study entitled “Spatial turn. Finally” (v. K. Schlögel, *W przestrzeni czas czytamy (In the Space We Read Time)*, pp. 56-68).

<sup>28</sup> According to M. Bakhtin it is “relevant reciprocal linking between temporal and spatial relations, artistically assimilated in literature” (M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Literature and Aesthetics*, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1982, p. 278).

<sup>29</sup> He treats towns as the most comprehensive documents about the past, as its “stone records” whose mode of reading is to wander the streets and reconstruct the genesis of why individual spaces fell apart: social, cultural, mental. A historian who reads the signs becomes a tracer, a specific type of archaeologist whose main task is to restore in the present those invisible towns, and thus start a dialogue with previous generations. See: K. Schlögel, *Raume und Geschichte*, pp. 34-42.



so-called *topographical turn*<sup>30</sup> as a project contesting substantial perception of space. According to the assumptions of the theory, the subject of research in cultural and literary studies is not (or should not be) the concept of space per se, but its technical and cultural modes of representation (e.g. maps). The German researcher understands topographical representations of space as the “writing of a given place,” imagery associated with space, cartographical diagrams or “spatial order of things.”<sup>31</sup> This theory is not so much about the practice of constructing space, as about techniques for its representation and their descriptive analysis, for which literature studies seems most suited—not only due to the fact that literature studies is the deepest well of metaphors, but also because it has tools enabling the reconstruction of the variable conceptual semantics associated with space.<sup>32</sup> Weigel herself admits that *the topographical turn* in literature studies has led to the perception of sites not only as narrative figures or topoi, but also as specific identifiable geographical locations.<sup>33</sup>

Another direct reference to Weigel’s concept is made by a contemporary literary scholar Hartmut Böhme, who develops the concept of cultural topographies of literature (and defines literature as space having its own mapping).<sup>34</sup> He assigns topographies the role of a factor constituting cultures even if they still do not know a language system. The role of the *graphie* of space can be given to a path, building, movement, position or meadow as each of them imprints its own mark. *Gravure* is what has been carved as if in stone or cut in tree bark. It is both the signified and the signifying. From this perspective of culture, texts are written in space, which is their order and organization through cultural techniques. Hence, topographies mean always semiotically organized and culturally oriented space, as prefigurations of social activities, require cultural participants to be competent to read hidden characters and understand their meanings. They also constitute power relations and strengthen social control. They are associated with social regulations, and their collapse can lead to a feeling of alienation, impaired orientation, social anomie, or even identity crises.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> S. Weigel, *Zum topographical turn. Kartographie, Topographie und Raumkonzepte in den Kulturwissenschaften*, “KulturPoetik“, Bd. 2, H. 2 (2002), pp. 151-165.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>32</sup> See T. Anz, *Raum als Metapher. Anmerkungen zum “topographical turn“ in den Kulturwissenschaften*, *Literaturkritik.de*, no. 2 (February 2008) [http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez\\_id=11620](http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez_id=11620) (last accessed 30.07.2011).

<sup>33</sup> S. Weigel, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>34</sup> H. Böhme, *Einleitung: Raum — Bewegung — Topographie*, [in:] *idem* (Hrsg.), *op. cit.*, pp. IX-XXIII, here: p. IX.

<sup>35</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. XVIII-XXI.

The meaning of the spatial turn to literature studies becomes clear primarily upon the assumption that the semantics of space, being a product of culture, consists of meanings encoded in language. And how does the semantics of emptiness relate to this in the context of the Holocaust?

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The first kind of emptiness which should be mentioned in the context of the discussion about the Holocaust is a discursive emptiness, a kind of gap in the public discourse which is a result of collective forgetting.<sup>36</sup> This emptiness can be observed both in the Polish and German public discourse of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the causes are not homogeneous in the two countries. Also, the ways and the dynamics of overcoming this emptiness are different.<sup>37</sup> It seems that the German society did manage to

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<sup>36</sup> Transformation, diminishing, reinterpreting and pushing into the unconscious of certain beliefs concerning the past which are somewhat too painful for individual or collective consciousness, cause the abandonment of public discussion about them and deprive them of the possibility to be the basis for any collective or individual action. See M. Ziółkowski, *Pamięć i zapominanie: trupy w szafie polskiej zbiorowej pamięci (Memory and Forgetting: Skeletons in the Polish Collective Memory Closet)*, "Kultura i społeczeństwo", 2001, No. 3-4, pp. 4-5. This process, as commented by Piotr says Forecki in the context of Polish discourse on the Holocaust, usually indicates "the more or less realised and deliberate disposition of the members of the community to ignore certain aspects of the past and remove them beyond the range of collective memory. The aspects which cause embarrassment, psychological discomfort, are a reason for shame and sometimes burden them with responsibility and besides symbolic remedy in the form of e.g. a public act of apology they call for practical actions in the form of reparations or restitution. They do not fit the cultivated narratives merely about own valor, glory and suffering, but draft a completely new story whose account would present the past in its varied, complex dimension and would also require necessary correction to collective memory enriching it and introducing consistency between pride and shame" (P. Forecki, *From the Shoah to Fear. Disputes about Polish-Jewish past and memory in public debates*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2010, p. 26).

<sup>37</sup> The German discourse on the Holocaust and the role of the German people as the perpetrators of this tragedy has been restored to the collective consciousness of the German Federal Republic only in the 60s of 20<sup>th</sup> century in the so-called "the uprising of the sons against their fathers." The first postwar generation began to insist on talking about the past, about the role that previous generations had played during the war. Previously, there was no such discussion, the West German society, trying to shut out the traumatic experiences and feeling of guilt, announced in the 50s of 20<sup>th</sup> century "hour 0" and focused on the future, on the effects of the economic miracle and building the new country. Instead, the official policy of memory of the German Democratic Republic focused on emphasizing Communism struggling against Nazism and glorification of political victims. The foundation myths of the two German states did not include the memory of the death of the Jews. The entire system of commemorating the

deal with the past faster through developing a memory policy with clearly defined rules. The role of its members in the Holocaust was undisputed. The Polish discourse, however, which immediately after the war stood a chance to become a memory discourse, paying due tribute to both the truth and victims<sup>38</sup>, was hampered by the total denial of the Jewish elements and excessive focusing on national martyrdom. Including a true memory of the Holocaust would in fact have to lead to changes in the auto-image of the Polish society, to deconstructing our national identity. And displaying “skeletons in the closet of the Polish memory”<sup>39</sup> would bring consequences which we were not ready to face for a long time.

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victims of both totalitarian regimes—Nazism and Communism was developed in the form of the so-called policy of memory only after their union. See K. Hammerstein, *Schuldige Opfer? Der Nationalsozialismus in den Grundungsmythen der DDR, Osterreichs und der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, [in:] R. Fritz (Hrsg.), *Nationen und ihre Selbstbilder: Postdiktatorische Gesellschaften in Europa*, Wallstein Verl., Göttingen 2008, pp. 39-61. Piotr Forecki writes at length about the Polish national community of selective memory and forgetting and he recognises the Holocaust as a paradigmatic example of this process whose political taboo, and thus the official politics of instrumentalising the Polish-Jewish relations led by the communist system of government in the People’s Republic of Poland, corresponded with the social taboo expressing a bottom-up need to forget which resulted from the disturbing nature of what should have been forgotten, from mental numbness and guilt (see K. Kersten, *Polacy, Żydzi, Komunizm. Anatomia półprawd 1939–1968 (Poles, Jews, Communism. Anatomy of Half-Truths 1939-1968)*, Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, Warsaw 1992, p. 150). What was also missing was a community of Jews themselves—the main medium of memory about Jewish death. Its place was taken by the Polish community of oblivion. For specific causes of Polish amnesia connected with the pre-war anti-Semitism, distance between the two nations, the German occupation politics and the post-war situation of our society see chapter “Genealogy of the Need to Forget” in: P. Forecki, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-62.

<sup>38</sup> In the first years after the war quite a lot was written—in comparison to the later period—about the Holocaust, not forgetting at the same time controversial topics. In magazines such as “Odrodzenie,” “Tygodnik Powszechny,” “Kućnica” and “Twórczość,” Polish intellectuals tried to deal with the ghosts of the recent past. They wrote about the Polish pre-war anti-Semitism, the attitudes of Poles towards the Holocaust, their indifference. They directed harsh criticism at the members of the Polish society who had supported the Nazis or trespassed against Jews through acts of collective pogroms or single acts of hatred. Also Polish film and literature were not indifferent to this tragedy. The works of such writers as Czesław Miłosz, Jerzy Zagórski, Stanisław Wygodzki, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Zofia Nałkowska, Krystyna Żywulska, Tadeusz Breza, Adolf Rudnicki, Kazimierz Brandys, Stefan Otwinowski or Tadeusz Borowski responded as well. The discussion turned so lively in the absence of any official construction of the war time, the memory was still alive. We could quote after Assmann—memory was communicative, unstructured, based on own memories of the near past present in everyday communication. See selected studies: P. Forecki, *op. cit.*, 64, footnote 186.

<sup>39</sup> Marek Ziółkowski uses such a term with respect to our national traumas (*idem, op. cit.*, p. 9).

The return of the Jew to Polish culture (to use the term after Przemysław Czapliński)<sup>40</sup> happened at the turn of the 60s and 70 of the last century. Aleksandra Ubertowska regards the publication of Hanna Krall's column *Make it Before God* (1977) as its foreshadowing. This paved the way for numerous issues, in the 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of journals and diaries of Holocaust survivors<sup>41</sup>. On the Polish books market there appeared books which—according to Czapliński—“seemed to discover the Jewish otherness as lost and finally recovered fragment of Polish identity.”<sup>42</sup> They met with positive reception which Czapliński interprets as Polish memory being ready to open up to a new identity and a token of longing with which the story of Jewish presence in recent Polish history was awaited.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, certain aspects of the Holocaust were still ignored. Indeed, we talked about the emptiness felt after the loss of neighbours, however, we did not mention our own guilt.

The first moral voice in the debate was widely commented in Jan Błoński's esej<sup>44</sup>. That voice called for admitting “complicity” for the indifference towards

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<sup>40</sup> See P. Czapliński, *Polska do wymiany. Poźna nowoczesność i nasze wielkie narracje (Poland to Be Replaced. Late Modernity and Our Grand Narratives)*, W.A.B., Warsaw 2009, p. 295.

<sup>41</sup> A. Ubertowska sees a similar dynamics to opening of public discourse to the issues related to the Holocaust in Western Europe. Claude Lanzmann's film *The Shoah* (1985, but it had been in the making for several years, so since the 70s of the last century) proved to be a milestone in this context. What was also symptomatic of this process were the editions of further volumes of Art Spiegelman's comics novel *Maus* (1986, 1991) and the debate conducted since 1988 over the construction of the monument in Berlin to the murdered Jews of Europe. See A. Ubertowska, *Świadectwo — Trauma — Głos. Literackie reprezentacje Holokaustu (Certificate—Trauma—Voice. Literary Representations of the Holocaust)*, Universitas, Kraków 2007, pp. 9-10.

<sup>42</sup> The list also includes novels issued in 1987 such as *Weiser Dawidek* by Paweł Huelle, *Umschlagplatz* (1987) by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz or *The Holocaust* by Piotr Szewc (P. Czapliński, *op. cit.*, p. 296).

<sup>43</sup> “Together with [the story]—says Czapliński—we recognized that the post-war society is homogeneous, but incomplete, that we had to give up the fanaticism as the only official victims of World War II and the later communism years and that we should include Jews into the collective ritual of mourning memory. The dead and the murdered became our absent, their departure—a task for our stories. The new character decreased the state of national ownership, but also enriched it, as it urged the reader to reflect on the historical and the cultural and pulled him/her into building a common narrative embracing both the Pole and the Jew. Moreover, the same strategy could be noticed in books of Jewish authors. *Kaddish* by Henryk Grynberg (1987) or *Skrawek czasu (A Piece of Time)* by Ida Fink (1987) told of a murdered community, allowing all, and therefore Poles, a sublime experience of grief over a loss and incorporate Holocaust victims into the common ritual of lamenting” (*ibid.*).

<sup>44</sup> J. Błoński, *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto (Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto)*, “Tygodnik Powszechny”, 1987, No. 2 See also a comment by Piotr Forecki *O czym Błoński powiedział Miłoszem (What Błoński said Using Miłosz)*, [in:] *idem, op. cit.*, pp. 149-165.

the Holocaust (which was almost equal to allowing it to happen). That action step would regenerate collective identity. It took, however, another twenty three years for Polish discourse to begin to admit the actual guilt of the Polish nation, the active participation of its members in the Holocaust. According to the Polish narrative of Jews' death it was Germans who were always the perpetrators, and Poles—passive witnesses. Only the publications of Polish sociologist Jan Tomasz Gross<sup>45</sup> settled in the United States, which sparked a tumultuous national debate, forced a redefinition of our role. This required developing new ways of narration. Czapliński writes,

... [in] Gross's book the offender turned into a Polish neighbor, a man like us, able to unite with their compatriots in a racist mass murder. Including Jews into the mourning narrative that was ongoing in Polish literature turned out to be not enough ... "the killing of neighbours" presented by Gross required penance and/or self-incriminating narratives. The Jews murdered by the occupant deserved a mourning train, the people killed by fellow countrymen demand investigation.<sup>46</sup>

Tadeusz Słobodzianek took up the role of such an investigator. In his play entitled *Our Class*<sup>47</sup> (for which he received a literary award Nike a year later) he outlines the biographies of ten students (Poles and Jews) who belonged to the same class in a provincial town in eastern Poland before the war. The reader who has some experience with the public discourse on the Holocaust immediately identifies the town as Jedwabne, where a group of Poles actively participated in the killing of their Jewish neighbours in 1941.<sup>48</sup> The characters of the drama are the ghosts and ghouls of the

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<sup>45</sup> J.T. Gross, *Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka (Neighbours. The History of the Destruction of the Jewish Town)*, Pogranicze, Sejny 2000; idem, *Strach. Antysemityzm w Polsce tuż po wojnie. Historia moralnej zapaści (Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland After the War. The History of Moral Collapse)*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2008, J.T. Gross, I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Złote żniwa. Rzecz o Tym, Co się Działo na Obrzeżach Zagłady Żydów (Golden Harvest. The Thing About What Happened on the Outskirts of the Jewish Holocaust)*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2011.

<sup>46</sup> P. Czapliński, *op. cit.*, p. 331.

<sup>47</sup> T. Słobodzianek, *Nasza klasa. Historia w XIV lekcjach (Our Class. History in Fourteenth Lessons)*, Słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2009.

<sup>48</sup> The author himself guides us onto this trail, admitting in the drama closing note, that he drew inspiration from the publication and films touching upon the Jedwabne massacre. Anna Bikont, the author of *My z Jedwabnego (Us, from Jedwabne)* (2004), writes in one of her articles about Słobodzianek, the founder of the Wierszalin Theatre that even in the 90s of the last century he insisted that "the periphery has power and that it is worth living where you can restore the value of the borderland. He later stated that the Polish country was unbearable and he moved from Białystok to Warsaw", explaining that his "vision of the borderland was a dream in which he had fallen ... for many years. The myth of Wierszalin was broken by Jedwabne. He understood ... that the borderland was no idyllic, but lined with hate,

participants in those events that come back and tell their stories, resorting to simple emotions: “There is nothing in them except aggression or pain which are beyond understanding, cannot be tamed, torment like an endless nightmare”<sup>49</sup>. Despite their lives coinciding with the true fate of the town’s inhabitants, the ghosts remain fictitious characters embracing all the possible types of behaviour of that period.<sup>50</sup> Słobodzianek is far from making moral judgments and patronising, stereotypical division into the good and the bad, innocent victims and perpetrators that deserve to be condemned. He admits in an interview with Anna Bikont: “[I don’t] want[s] to accuse or judge anyone when we are dealing with a drama, tragedy”—in order to avoid the risk of harmful interpretations he tells “made up—though based on a real events—stories and [builds] in them true relationships between the invented characters.” Hence, he creates fiction which “resembles reality, but does not itself claim to be such, although it pretends to seek the truth”<sup>51</sup>.

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crime, and that we have to settle the bill of the blood shed” (A. Bikont, *Słobodzianek: Pojdziesz za mną w ogień (Słobodzianek: Follow Me Into the Fire)*, “Gazeta Wyborcza”, 24.10.2010, source: [http://wyborcza.pl/1,75480,8546696,Slobodzianek-\\_Pojdziesz\\_za\\_mna\\_w\\_ogien.html?as=1&startsz=x](http://wyborcza.pl/1,75480,8546696,Slobodzianek-_Pojdziesz_za_mna_w_ogien.html?as=1&startsz=x) [last accessed 25/07/2011]).

<sup>49</sup> As we read the eulogy by professor Grażyna Borkowska during awarding Słobodzianek with the Nike Award (*Nike 2010. Co się stało z tamtą klasą?*—Nike 2010. What Has Happened With That Class?—“Gazeta Wyborcza”, 03/10/2010, source: [http://wyborcza.pl/1,75402,8458926,Nike\\_2010\\_\\_Co\\_sie\\_stalo\\_z\\_tamta\\_klasa\\_.html](http://wyborcza.pl/1,75402,8458926,Nike_2010__Co_sie_stalo_z_tamta_klasa_.html) [last accessed 25.07.2011]).

<sup>50</sup> These roles are becoming increasingly confused depending on the changing political systems whose descriptions are included in each consequentially delivered lesson. We meet Jakub Katz, a young intellectual, socialist and Bund supporter, who in autumn 1939, following the entry of the Red Army, fearfully becomes a Soviet officer, which he himself sees as a betrayal of his ideals. His school friends, Polish patriots, conformists, security police workers and catholics indulge themselves in judging a young Jew, passing a judgment and executing the highest punishment, consequently violating the great order of the world and leading to other tragedies whose first peak is the burning barn. Some Jews from the town manage to escape the massacre because they had left Poland before the war (like Abram, who was sent to America by his grandparents to study to be a rabbi, and who, being unaware of the fate of his friends, writes naïve and idealistic letters from overseas), or had been hidden by Polish friends (like Rachel, rescued by Władek who had been secretly in love with her since school days; she was later forced to convert to Catholicism and marry her saviour, or like Menachem hiding in the attic of his friend Zocha’s barn; Zocha combines noble naïvete with amorality pragmatic thinking; Menachem is a stereotypical Jewish character portrayed from the anti-semitic perspective who takes revenge on Poles after the war, the killers of his wife and child, torturing them in security police dungeons). Shifts in political systems make yesterday’s oppressors victims or ‘decent’ citizens (like Heniek whose youth sins do not prevent him from following his post-war clergy career), and victims become oppressors (Menachem).

<sup>51</sup> Tadeusz Słobodzianek in conversation with Anna Bikont *Tadeusz Słobodzianek i fikcja, która szuka prawdy* (Tadeusz Słobodzianek and Fiction Which Seeks the Truth), “Gazeta Wyborcza”,



It seems that the author achieves his goal: talking about Jedwabne bluntly, without concealment, sharply, vividly and terrifyingly, he touches the taboo of the participants in those events, bringing to light not only their simple (not to say: vulgar) motivations, but also an extremely fatal entanglement of historical circumstances that led to the anomie, emphasis shifts, blurring values and loss of orientation.

Słobodzianek's drama does not apply only to the Jedwabne massacre, does not divide time into "before" and "after." This tragedy, under the pressure of new developments and problems, eventually disappears from view, is swallowed by time. Art is also reflection on collective memory, the possibilities of its instrumentalisation, process of rationalisation and attempting to live with remorse, and finally reflection on forgetting which is both salutary and disastrous at the same time. It cannot be denied that it is one of the first, decisive voices within literature that tries to bury national skeletons.

Ewa Andrzejewska tells of the Holocaust, or rather the mental and material emptiness that remained after it, in a slightly softer tone. Her literary debut, novel *Next to Another Time. On the City and Jakub*<sup>52</sup>, is a relation of the meeting with Jakub M., the last resident of the pre-war shtetl in southern Poland.<sup>53</sup> Experiencing the ghetto and deportation of local Jews is the background of the story. However, it gains the feel of the decisive turning point in this novel that escapes its genre categories. The point before which there was life and after which there was nothing except an obscure tangle of lines on old maps and a heap of stones in the form of a few barely discernible cottages in the former "hell"<sup>54</sup> ghetto. Jakub M. comes to his town every spring and looks after the peace of all the dead on his side who lie in an old Jewish cemetery.<sup>55</sup> During one of his struggles with the bureaucracy he

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21/09/2010, source: [http://wyborcza.pl/1,106971,8403192,Tadeusz\\_Slobodzianek\\_i\\_fikcja\\_ktora\\_szuka\\_prawdy.html?as=1&startsz=x](http://wyborcza.pl/1,106971,8403192,Tadeusz_Slobodzianek_i_fikcja_ktora_szuka_prawdy.html?as=1&startsz=x) [last access: 25.07.2011]).

<sup>52</sup> E. Andrzejewska *Obok inny czas. O mieście i Jakubie (Next to a Different Time. About the Town and Jakub)*, Wydawnictwo Nisza, Warsaw 2010 (hereinafter cited as: OMJ).

<sup>53</sup> The prototype of this character is Jakub Müller who died towards the end of 2010, the last Jew of Sącz, a Holocaust witness and a Jewish cemetery guardian at ul. Rybacka in Nowy Sącz. I owe this information to the website of the Polish Historical Society in Nowy Sącz (source: <http://www.pth.nowysacz.mnet.pl/index.php?function=display&bit=52> [last accessed 25/07/2011]).

<sup>54</sup> As we learn from Jakub M.'s story, pre-war residents called hell the less affluent part of the town, located in the lower part behind the river surrounding the centre with the castle. During the war two ghettos were created in the town: one more affluent in the center and the other "in Hell."

<sup>55</sup> "Year after year, Jakub M. come to town; usually in the spring ... he appears in the Jewish cemetery. Wearing a weave hat he opens the ohel and starts cleaning up. He checks

meets clerk Ewa. She has lived in Hell since the 80s and later becomes a faithful listener to his stories: “stories about a town within the Town ... and about its traces” (OMJ, p. 15).

Jakub M. recalls everything, even the houses and stones which no longer exist. He draws them with an umbrella in the air, and every memory is for him “like a knife pushed into the heart” (ibid., p. 10). He goes on with telling about synagogues and rabbis, houses of prayer weathered over time, shops, taverns, Jewish schools, squares and markets, bakeries, shoemakers, gardens and the chicken coops and sukkahs standing in them—“... revolves around himself and when he slowly draws signs in the air everything falls into place” (ibid., p. 71). We are witnessing the re-creation of the world, recovering it from the depths of oblivion. The old Jew also resurrects townspeople because each venue is associated with a human’s fate: happiness and joy that accompany e.g. a wedding or festivities celebrated before the war, but also sadness, crying and fear during the last visit to the synagogue, hiding in attics and cellars during escaping from the ghetto. Crumbling walls of synagogues, smoke from the chimneys of dilapidated houses, leaning gravestones in an old Jewish cemetery, a lone lime tree overwhelmed by a contemporary block of flats which used to be surrounded by an old garden, the smell coming from a bakery, a scarecrow in a red skirt, single given names of town residents, miraculously rescued yellowed photographs, a string of amber from a Jewish attic, a Jewish path in the meadows by the river, scraps of memories—all this contributes to a melancholic topography of a ‘shtetl’ on the Dunajec river. A melancholic one as it is plotted with the words of the last living, lonely, crossing boundaries of the time—Jakub M.

Andrzejewska not only reconstructs the story of that world. What makes her book particularly interesting is the outline of the relationship, so symptomatic for Polish culture, between our identity and the world that once existed. The narrator reminisces that after she moved to the old Jewish quarter “[she] would shuffle all over the new apartment [and] felt another time right next to her. She moved ... slowly ... so as not to frighten or see something” (ibid., p. 52). Later, she discovered that some items in the house suddenly disappear only to appear in a completely different place. She realized that “it was them who took those or placed somewhere else” (ibid., p. 45), that she had become part of the community the memory of which was slowly fading. Since then, always on the way home passing by sites that no longer exist, she says their names as if under some kind of inner compulsion.

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how many flowers got burned, ... and whether the path is covered with new grass. He once called to say that it had not grown tall enough so that we could quickly pass the electric cable more in the middle of the path because the dead could lie at the very edge, or even a bit off the path. Who knows? You have to reconcile all” (OMJ, p. 9).

In the image of the quarter she looks for traces of the past, and when they are gone forever she also decides to leave, unable to bear the decline of the world progressing in front of her eyes. It turns out that

... the Jewish death, memory and forgetting about it are—according to Ubertowska—subtext to Polish culture and identity ..., that the Holocaust—the “displaced” and “unprocessed”—concerns us much more than we wish to admit that the destruction of European Jewry was perhaps the most overwhelming and incredibly painful loss for us.<sup>56</sup>

There is another story told by a German sociologist and a second post-Holocaust generation author who has recently taken to prose writing.<sup>57</sup> It is similar in its construction, but very different in expression and showing another kind of emptiness than Andrzejewska’s novel. It is Minka Pradelski whose literary debut entitled *Und da kam Frau Kugelmann*<sup>58</sup> is also an account of an unexpected encounter with a Holocaust eyewitness, the title character Ms Kugelmann. She seeks to resurrect as many residents as possible through the story of the pre-war Będzin.<sup>59</sup> Similarly to Jakub M. from Andrzejewska’s novel, Ms Kugelmann cannot and does not want to forget. She wanders the streets of her childhood and brings out an infinite number of details from her memory with which she assembles anew the vibrant Jewish town on the Polish-Silesian border. However, she spins her story not in Będzin, but in Israel, where she arrived in 1948. Sitting in the foyer of a hotel in Tel Aviv, she observes young travellers from abroad, probably Jews of the diaspora who—like her—are not to find their place in a new country. Nevertheless, because of their Jewish origin, they may be interested in a mental journey to the country of their fathers’ origin.

The novel’s narrator herself becomes one of the listeners to this seemingly never-ending story—Zippy Silbermann. She lives in Frankfurt on Main and owes her visit in the second largest Israeli city to her recently deceased aunt Halina, after whom she inherits an incomplete set of fish cutlery and an old trunk. Initially, Zippy is reluctant towards Ms Kugelmann’s intrusive stories.

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<sup>56</sup> A. Ubertowska, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>57</sup> Its best-known representatives within German literature are authors such as David Grossman, Maxim Biller, Robert Schindel, Gila Lustiger and Viola Roggenkamp.

<sup>58</sup> M. Pradelski, *Und da kam Frau Kugelmann*, Frankfurter Verlagsanstalt, Frankfurt a. Main 2005 (hereinafter cited as: FK).

<sup>59</sup> “Please, listen carefully to what I have to say to you, do not run away. I have to tell, otherwise my town will die. ... All of our teachers and students remain alive. They live among us, here in Israel. ... We, former students, are the ones who keep them alive. We tell each other stories about them. We clean the dust of the years, polish, work like plasticine and massage until everything is flexible and resilient again, and they suddenly begin to move” (FK, p. 15, translated D.G.—as well as the other parts).

Within two weeks she becomes a slave to those stories. This can be attributed to the old Jewish woman's oratorical skills, were it not for young Silbermann's longing for a conversation which had never received from her own parents. She comes from a house in which the trauma associated with the Holocaust crossed generational boundaries: Zippy's parents, unable to deal with their own past, pass it over in silence, depriving their child of the possibility to identify herself with the family history which normally constitutes the core of individual identity.<sup>60</sup> The only fact from the parents' pre-war life known to Zippy concerns the name "Kalisz"—the town her father came from. The rest remained mystery.<sup>61</sup>

Ms Kugelmann's story fills this textual and emotional emptiness. It is the story during which Zippy tries to imagine how the city of her father could look like. The process of identification of the young Frankfurt resident with the story told in the hotel room is becoming increasingly clear. Eventually, an illusion is created in her mind of belonging to the real Będzin community.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> In the case of Zippy's father being quiet about the past takes on an extreme form: the day the narrator being a little girl comes back from school for the first time her father stops talking to her. Requests do not help, nor does blackmailing, refusing to eat hot meals and going to school. Father remains silent, distant, cold. Also mother, who in a moment of weakness recalls two rooms suffering from fever where she spent her childhood, asks her daughter to forget everything she heard from her: "I will not be able to forget, if I know that you think about it. You must extinguish the memory of what you heard" (FK, p. 151). After that she falls silent for weeks. The narrator blames herself for her parents' silence, mother's rooms become her curse. She tries to save that world from oblivion, but she falls more and more into loneliness which she gets partly liberated from by Ms Kugelmann's story.

<sup>61</sup> Zippy's is not the only family where silence between the parents' generation and children has become the norm. Ms Kugelmann owns up to a similar. She has never uttered anything even close to the name of the town where she was born in the presence of her sons, not to mention the other stories related to it. She claims that her children have never asked about it and she wanted to protect them from growing up in an atmosphere filled with the memory of death and destruction: "We protected each other. ... They didn't want to make me cry. I would have crashed against my own words. And my kids knew about it, even though none of us even mentioned in a single word" (FK, p. 220).

<sup>62</sup> A link between the two worlds comes in the form the fish cutlery set inherited by Zippy. Ms Kugelmann recognises them as probably the same which she used during her first meal after arriving in Israel. Halina took her in then, the older sister of her Będzin friend, the beautiful Gonna who in the last days of August 1939 left Poland to study in the newly created Jewish state. His trip was possible due to a certain scam associated with deceiving the recruitment board. He did not share his idea with a school friend, who as a result of failure to comply with all the formalities was not granted a visa. This friend, Kotek, was killed in one of the gas chambers. When after the war Gonna found out about his friend's fate, shocked and tormented with remorse he came back to Europe without saying goodbye. Tracing back the history of the first and last name that Gonna changed after the war, Zippy and Ms Kugelmann attempt to draw parallels between him and Zippy's father. Although Ms Kugelmann does

For the heroine, however, recovering the past of her parents is not enough. She proposes cooperation with Ms Kugelmann: together with her she wants to tell people about Będzin so that as many people as possible could hear the story. She wants to be a liaison between the lost world and the one today, a reviver of history and its heroes. However, the proposal is rejected on the grounds that only eyewitnesses can be credible (FK 250). Zippy decides then to write the story of little Bella as she remembered it from Ms Kugelmann's story. The novel which was born out of real experience ends with a utopian belief that writing against the silence of the parents can fill the emptiness created by it.

Pradelski developed in her novel a sense of obligation to maintain the memory of the nearly nonexistent world in combination with the urge to confirm or find its own identity. This leads us to another prose debut worth mentioning. "The first literary voice in Poland of the third generation after the Holocaust," as Piotr Paziński's mininovel *Pensjonat*<sup>63</sup> was described by Justyna Sobolewska<sup>64</sup>. This is not only about exploring the mystery of "melancholic identity, shaped not by experience, suffering or trauma, but through echoes, shadows and reminiscence of memories"<sup>65</sup>. On the one hand, this is also in a way a journey of self-examination of "the last of the generations chain" of the Jewish nation to the guest house, the one from the title, placed at the "Vistula rail line"—the site where the narrator spent with his grandmother every summer of his childhood. It is also—and perhaps most of all—an image of the world which is almost gone ("we almost do not exist, and you think we still..." [P, p. 87]), and whose departure Paziński still dwells on in his melancholic archeology of memory, and he does not allow it to dissolve totally in non-time symbolised by the motionless hands of the railway station clock.

Thick fog, growing even thicker and thicker by the minute and enveloping a guest house that was once full and vibrant and now asleep, seems to mark the border separating our reality from the underworld. It

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not really believe in such a coincidence, she does not disperse Zippy's delusion about having discovered her family history.

<sup>63</sup> P. Paziński, *Pensjonat (Guest House)* Wydawnictwo Nisza, Warsaw 2010 (hereafter cited as P).

<sup>64</sup> J. Sobolewska, Taniec z cieniami. Recenzja książki: Piotr Paziński, *Pensjonat* (Dancing with Shadows. Book Review: Piotr Paziński, *Guest House*), "Polityka", 30.07.2010, source: <http://www.polityka.pl/kultura/ksiazki/297843,1,recenzja-ksiazki-piotrpazinski-pensjonat.read> (last accessed 25.07.2011).

<sup>65</sup> J. Kurkiewicz, *Piotr Paziński: Istniejemy jeszcze-jeszcze (Piotr Paziński: we exist just yet)*, "Gazeta Wyborcza," 16/06/10, source: [http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,8019411,Istniejemy\\_jeszcze\\_jeszcze.html#ixzz0rIWyaHSO](http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,8019411,Istniejemy_jeszcze_jeszcze.html#ixzz0rIWyaHSO) (last accessed 25.07.11).

also seems a perfect complement to the atmosphere with which the ark of Jewish post-war culture has managed to soak since the narrator's last visit. It is here, in a common room decorated with a clumsy fresco, that years ago the ideological disputes between sir Abram and sir Leon happened, Mr Chaim dozed off in a plush chair, Dr. Kahn read articles in Jewish Polish magazine "Folks-Sztyme," chess was played, readings were listened to, New Year's Eve events were organised. Today the hall is locked with a padlock. The corridors are shrouded in darkness, turning the building into a maze whose damp walls are covered with mould and the bricks seem to have been woven from shoddy material that threatens to come apart at any time. The furniture and rooms decor have not changed for years, perhaps only those inhabited by past vacationers, Lady Tecia or sir Jakub, resemble more and more a chaotic heap of unnecessary archives, hiding real treasures of the past. It was at lady Tecia's that the narrator finds a box filled with wrappings. Like mummies, postcards and war letters written in Jewish lie in it and most of the letters erased by time.<sup>66</sup> There is also a second parcel, with pictures. Holding in his hands those symbolic testimonies after his relatives and friends of the family, the narrator realises that the only thing that demands absolute survival is memory.<sup>67</sup> He humbly listen to the stories of those who still circulate between the dining room and the garden ("Here, everyone has such a story to sell. Great sale on memories ..., only given away for free because no-one wants to buy them," [P, p. 83]), and finally, on the way back to the railway station, he follows sir Jakub, his guide through the remnants of the surviving world, deep into the woods, to a clearing, and be witness the miracle of resurrection.<sup>68</sup>

The last scene of the novel can be read as proposed by Karolina Wieliczko<sup>69</sup>, as a dilemma of the descendant of the nation sentenced to the Holocaust

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<sup>66</sup> "Characters in the letters, almost illegible anyway, melted into the darkness. They diminished by the minute in places where just a moment ago I could see their outline, and even tried to rearrange them into words, to capture their common sense in any language, now only emptiness of frayed parchment stretched" (P, p. 24).

<sup>67</sup> "In place of each rubbed letter evil settles in .... And every crippled roof, ripped leg, damaged crown ... don't they shake the foundations of the universe and deprive it of a particle of its existence?" (P, p. 23).

<sup>68</sup> "When we reached the top of the hill ... sir Jakub looked at the nearby bushes ... he led a secret dialogue with himself, and then struck his cane on the ground—so hard that a cloud of dust rose above the forest undergrowth. And suddenly guest house residents swarmed around—as once in our garden. They were older than before, but more familiar in their dark jackets, checked coats and collar scarves made from animal paws, in hats and forage caps in shoes and moccasins by which I could easily recognize them now" (P, pp. 132-133).

<sup>69</sup> K. Wieliczko, *Niewypowiedziany kadysz. Paweł Paziński "Pensjonat" (Unspoken Kaddish. Paweł Paziński "Pension House")*, source: <http://teksty-niekulturalne.umcs.lublin.pl/index>.



years ago: should he write his life into its fate? It seems that nobody expects such sacrifice from him. His willingness to join the forest community will be reluctantly approved by the members. The only task that may be entrusted to him is to cherish the memory.

The memory whose cherishing becomes a curse rather than make life meaningful is the subject of the last novel which requires to be discussed in the context of these considerations. Iris Hanika, a German journalist and writer, born after the war, writes a brave book about the tragedy of a man bearing the stigma of belonging to the nation which was the main perpetrator of one of the greatest tragedies of mankind. *Das Eigentliche*<sup>70</sup> is a bold, critical voice in the discussion on German policy on memory and so-called *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, reckoning with the past which for this author takes the form of “Vergangenheitsbewirtschaftung”—its mechanical and mass management.

Hanika assigns her reader with the role of an observer to several random days in the life of Hans Frambach, an archives at the “Management of the Past Institute” employee. This is an institution which due to its physical size tries to satisfy the role that it has come to play in the country which made its primary duty to “remove from the citizens’ shoulders the burden of permanent uncovering of crimes committed by their ancestors.” As a result, “the memory of these crimes has become a never-ending task” (E, pp. 22-23). Numerous monuments and sites of memory that were created for this purpose, in Frambach’s mind, however, appear to be “a total flop” (E, p. 165) that covers a real, living history—politics that under the guise of formal correctness does not hold any meaningful content. Institutionalisation, commercialization and attempts to explain the Holocaust by supplying them with some meaning of values espoused e.g. by Christianity, deprive the memory of that experience its proper meanings and, thereby, prevent the integration of its true meanings into the nation’s auto-image. This does no longer raise any personal associations, becomes one of the common elements of reality. No-one is interested in the points of topography that do not mean anything, and thousands of sites of memory have turned into such.

Moreover, an archivist Hans also develops a profound sense of meaninglessness of work. He chose the profession out of his inner conviction and a sense of duty towards the victims of the Holocaust: to soothe their biggest concern that their fate be not shared by next generations (E, p. 13). This moral compulsion to think continuously about the Holocaust become

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[php/krytycznie-literacko/172-niewypowiedziany-kadysz-pawe-paziski-qpensjonatq.html](http://php/krytycznie-literacko/172-niewypowiedziany-kadysz-pawe-paziski-qpensjonatq.html) (last accessed 25/07/11).

<sup>70</sup>I. Hanika, *Das Eigentliche*, Literaturverlag Droschl, Graz 2010 (hereinafter cited as E).

his shadow a long time ago: the crowded underground trains made him feel as if he was on a train transporting Jews to a death camp, watching birches he could think about nothing but Birkenau.<sup>71</sup> This great disaster, or rather a continuous pressure to compare his own life with it, became his personal tragedy. But as the state was taking over the duty of cherishing the memory, his personal urge to commemorate and related existential suffering began to melt away in lazy relaxation. Until the day of the first seeming liberation came.

During one of his official visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Frambach walks off from the group and goes towards the Birkenau gas chambers. The fact that his footsteps overlap with those of people who were going that way to die gives him nausea; and the fact that he does so entirely voluntarily seems ludicrous to him. Similarly to the Jews who were written off to die, he is not able to turn back from his path. At least it seems so to him because in the end, in front of the crematorium, his feet turn right and carry him towards the street outside the camp fence—"and [he is] free" (E, p. 133). After this statement in the book come three completely blank pages.

The author must have been aware (and perhaps even frightened by it) that such a description unwittingly stirs a downright obscene comparison of her character's situation to that of concentration camp prisoners. Indeed, Frambach did something that always seemed impossible to him, namely, he freed himself from the footsteps of the Holocaust victims. In no way, however, does this liberation correspond with the freedom of real prisoners, salvation from death by escaping from the camp. The blank pages can be interpreted in the context of emptiness that suddenly appeared in Hans's life. He is no longer obliged to follow in the footsteps of the victims. But did he actually do anything at all besides that? Was there any other meaning to his life? The reader gets time to come to their senses, to make brief remorse and review their method of reading the novel so far, all this in order to respond to a call once again several pages later. Indeed, the character takes flight again, this time away from his work place. Having lost complete sense of meaning to it and recognizing the business behind the politics of remembrance and which makes him feel completely alienated, he decides to go alight from his "grave in

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<sup>71</sup> Hanika develops here the topography of the Holocaust based on the symbols for a long time typically associated with it in our culture. This seems to be the only way to create the impression of the Holocaust omnipresence in the description of the space indirectly related to the Holocaust site. Another German writer used a similar technique, W.G. Sebald, who relating the narrator's stroll in one of his short stories around the industrial city of Manchester, described its atmosphere in such a way that the reader could not help an impression that he/she was not in England, but in the middle of Auschwitz-Birkenau. See W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz: Max Aurach*, [in:] *Wyjechali (They Left)*, W.A.B, Warsaw 2005.

the air”<sup>72</sup> to the real world of the little ones whom he has only been watching so far from the perspective of an official performing most important jobs in the country. What is more, he feels surprisingly comfortable in his new role and the reader is left with three pages called: Notes.

Iris Hanika criticises the German politics of memory as semantically empty. Calls for reflexion on the sense of personal remembrance whose semantic sign within her novels are blank pages. It is up to the reader to decide what to do with them.

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Although very subjective, the selection of novels presented here is not random. There may be texts that present more fully the different types of emptiness created as a result of the Holocaust experience. It seems, however, that the novels of Paziński, Hanika, Pradelski, Andrzejewska and Słobodzianek’s drama touch upon issues of individual and collective identity from all sides—sometimes gently, sometimes truly coldbloodedly. The identity that is constructed in relation to the site where one of the greatest tragedies of mankind occurred.

*Dominika Gortych*

**Cultural Topography of the Holocaust and the Identity. Semantics of Emptiness in the Contemporary Polish and German Novels**

A b s t r a c t

The aim of this paper is to outline the relationship between memory, space and identity with the help of the term “cultural topography.” All of the named categories will be discussed constructivistically, i.e. in accordance with the latest research on space, memory and identity. The culturally targeted analyses are underlayed by several specific Polish and German novels concerning oneself and the Holocaust from various perspectives. The selection includes texts by authors of the third generation

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<sup>72</sup> The simile related to the famous poem by Paul Celan *Death Fugue* could seem too pompous or too obscene, were it not for a specific distance towards the character that the narrator adopts throughout the novel. The reader has been so far instructed well enough how to treat this type of references. Thus, it does not attract much opposition or outrage.

of Holocaust-survivors, the so called later-born and intellectual witnesses who have no biographical relation to the Holocaust but nevertheless feel ethically bonded with this topic. The analysis of the texts concerns certain specific semantics of emptiness whose literal reconstruction is the main goal of this article.

*Keywords:* memory, identity, cultural topography, the Holocaust, contemporary Polish novels, contemporary German novels.