

The Dynamic Process of Remembering in Art – Perception of Victor Tolkin’s Historical Monuments Before and After Transformation of State System in Poland

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The presentation focuses on a new approach to cultural memory studies on the example of the sculptures of Wiktor Tolkin – the famous Polish artist, who represents the generation that grew up in the harsh realities of Second World War times. His monuments transcribe the memory of II world war’s experience and at the same time raise problems of visual shaping of memory.

The cultural memory is a process evolving in time. The artist always presents his/hers own, individual memory included in universalistic cultural memory – at the same time the artist connects individual and popular meaning of these problems. The artefacts undertake the dialog with the new generations of recipients and transfer individual tensions/emotions of artist into individual feeling of visitors, which in turn shape new society’s popular memory. These changes of society’s memory are always involved in politics and power relations. Polish society is the good example of this process, because the transformation of state’s system was undertaken twenty years ago, therefore it gives a good opportunity to observe these dynamic changes.

THE DYNAMIC PROCESS OF REMEMBERING IN ART

A great many contemporary researchers of various branches of science frequently address the broad issue of the analysis of processes and relations between memory and history. Their views are based on those aspects which are of special interest to them. Some, like Edward Casey, through analyses based on the philosophy of place, consider the nature of processes of remembering, memorizing and forgetting as well as their localization.¹ The aspect of memorial places was explored by Paul Ricoeur.² The author considered the issues of archived memory and remembrance sites. However, not all suggested distinctions fit the complicated socio-historical relations in Poland mutilated by the atrocities of the Second World War. A French author, Pierre Nora suggests the distinction between memorial places and historical places which seems to be inaccurate for Polish researchers³, as it is incompatible with Polish reality marked by the havoc wrought by the war both in the material and emotional sphere.⁴ The duty of commemorating both history and the places where it happened, so often stressed by Tolkin, the witness and the artist, is especially close to Tina Wasserman who emphasizes the ambiguity of the subject matter. Because of the juxtaposition of history and memory, or even their intermingling, scholars ponder the issue of the essence of individual memory and its relations with history. Tolkin's artistic work seems to confirm the importance of questions addressed by Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas. They claim that when art deals with public memory through recording the past in a work of art, it complicates and converts it into a different entity.⁵

The above outline of problems of memory and its repercussions in art is based on the views of theoreticians. Artists however, while dealing with this problem in a practical fashion, developed their own concepts. Faced with questions and doubts voiced by thinkers, they replied by means of form, composition and above all expression which, in the case of monuments of martyrdom, created foundations for the so called general message of the work of art. Once again art proved that it eludes all attempts at being defined and constrained by theory.

Wiktor Tolkin is a sculptor who attempted to preserve the memory about people, places and events and who defied the processes of forgetting.

His biography and artistic works are closely connected to historical realities. Wiktor Tolkin is part of the generation that grew up in the harsh reality of the Second World War. As a young man, he was a witness of horror in the concentration camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, the biggest Nazi concentration camp in Europe. Tolkin's best known achievements are two monuments. Both of his greatest monuments in the Nazi concentration camps in Stutthof and Majdanek in Lublin are examples of exploration of the universal language, which is understood by victims of Nazi and also by generations of people who did not experience the war. His monuments transcribe the memories of the Second World War experiences and at the same time raise problems of visual shaping of memory.

Tolkin's most familiar achievement are two monuments. Both of his greatest monuments in the fascist concentrations camps in Stutthof and Majdanek in Lublin are examples of

¹ E. S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place. Toward and Renewed Understanding of the Place-Word*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1993.

² P. Ricoeur, *Pamięć, historia, zapomnienie*, Universitas, Kraków 2007.

³ Such is the opinion of E. Chmielewska who discusses the issue of memorial places in Warsaw (E. Chmielewska, *Niepamięć w upamiętnianiu: szczególność miejsc traumy a typowość pamięci w ikono sferze Warszawy*, "Rzeźba Polska", t. XIII, s. 101-106.)

⁴ P. Nora, *Realms of Memory*, Columbia University Press, New York 1996.

⁵ F. Guerin, R. Hallas, *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, qt. by: E. Chmielewska, op. cit., p. 101.

exploration of universalistic language, which is understood by victims of Nazi and also by generations of people, who did not experience the war. His monuments transcript the memory of the Second World War experience and at the same time raise problems of visual shaping of memory.

The main aim of the Nazi concentration camp in Stutthof was the extermination of Polish and Jewish population from the territory of the Free City of Danzig and Pomerania. The first transport of prisoners arrived there two days after the outbreak of the war – 1st Sept, 1939. During the 5 years of its existence Stutthof was the place where 110 000 people were kept and it is estimated that eighty per cent of them perished there. Only 200 of the prisoners were to survive. The Stutthof National Museum was established in 1962. The building of the Monument of Struggle and Martyrdom started in 1965. Its design came from Wiktor Tolkin, and the author of construction was Janusz Dembek. Tolkin described the camp area as a terra sacra. The whole of the architectural complex has a monumental character of space composition. The monument consists of two main parts which face the opposing directions: the vertical – obelisk and the horizontal – mausoleum. The eleven-meter-tall obelisk, also called Nation Forum, commemorates the chute of crematorium's ashes. In the rough surface of the walls are shown anthropological contours – traces, shadows of humans who were killed in that place. The rectangular prism, which is 48 meters tall, marks out the horizontal direction. From the side of the crematorium there is a glass wall where remains are shown. The shorter wall of the mausoleum is covered with prisoners' camp numbers who survived this harsh time. Both walls of the mausoleum present a symbolical contrast between life and death.

The German concentration camp in Lublin, called Majdanek, came into existence in autumn 1941. Prisoners came from nearly 30 countries with Polish citizens predominating – mainly Jews and Poles. Tolkin's Monument of Struggle and Martyrdom in KL Majdanek was created as a spatial structure situated along the north – south axis. The original intention of Tolkin's was to arise visitors' feelings similar to the emotions experienced by Nazi victims. By using theatrical effects Tolkin succeeded in building tension. The first element which prepares the recipient is a concrete ravine, the sides of which bristle with sharp stones. One can get there along a steep path which gives the impression of an unfriendly and hostile route. It is supposed to recreate the fear which gripped the people who were brought there in cattle trucks. The steep path symbolizes the emotions and for this reason it can be interpreted as an opening of an artistic vision. As a young man, Tolkin experienced this kind of trauma, not in Majdanek, but in Auschwitz – the name of the concentration camp, though, does not matter. In the concrete narrow passageway with frightening sharp-edged rocks which make the impression that at any moment they will tumble down on passers-by, the artist-prisoner spins his story about the man driven under rifle butts towards the gate of hell which was here on earth in the concentration camps. What could have been the feeling of the people who were driven through the camp gateway? Fear and feeling of hopelessness in the situation they were forced to face, unable to oppose the forces of evil. The effort of climbing the steep path is a premonition of danger and suffering that awaits on the other side of the gate. However, there is also another path – a narrow crack in the wall on the right hand side, giving hope and symbolizing those who survived. An enormous load of concrete pressed into the torn prism, hangs above the ground as if defying gravity, it is supported only by two square pillars. It is being interpreted as a comparison to the gates of hell from the Divine Comedy by Dante – "All hope abandon, ye who enter here". Tolkin mentions those days in one of the interviews:

I was close to death many times. The memory of Auschwitz Birkenau sticks to me most firmly. A gate opened between the tenth and eleventh block and there appeared a gigantic wagon full of corpses tossed by people called "body-porters";

arms and legs dangling over the edges. I could see the stacks of corpses also by the crematory at the camp hospital.⁶

The artist also suggests that the gate may present another ghastly vision: "clouds of squeezed people". Where would that idea come from? I understood the phrase when I read the former prisoner Zofia Posmysz's manuscript titled *Christ of Auschwitz*⁷ brought to me by Tolkin. The author describes her experiences:

(...) then again I could see "a chimney of the crematorium puking with flames", stacks of bare bodies beneath blocks, I could hear the apocalyptic tumult of the ramp, and I could smell the omnipresent, nauseating stench of the burnt human flesh.

The monumental, expressive form puts one in a meditation and sublimity state. Further in the distance, in the gap under the massive gate, one can notice another stage of the pilgrimage – Route of Homage and Memory. It is about one kilometre long and it runs from one original watchtower to another all the way to the Mausoleum. From the southern side of the Gate the asphalt road goes straight to the wide stairs. Distance created by the artist gives the visitors some time for reflection and contemplations. It is an important and dignified time. Every step moves them closer towards the highest point of the Mausoleum, where seven hundred cubic meters of human ashes are confined inside. Treating the remains as relics is a tribute to those who were killed there – and for Tolkin that is the most important matter. At this point one should interpret the Majdanek's mausoleum – as a chalice, dome, burial mound, or a sepulchral candle. Although deeply symbolic, the disturbing austerity of the architectural form is enhanced with sculpted elements. The massive disc on top of the mausoleum is surrounded by the frieze of irregular, sculptural negative forms which correspond with the abstract form of the gate. The complementing and specifying of the essence which until this moment was only sensory, however it was not articulated so far is a relief inscription Let our fate be a warning to you, placed in the central part of the frieze, right above steps. And here the pilgrimage comes to an end. For the visitors the Gate and the Mausoleum constitute the beginning and the end of the memory lane, and for the victims – it was an end of their life. The artist made this deeply moving journey into the past possible for the sensitive recipient. He made an outstanding presentation of expression that is a result of combining various elements. I mean not only architecture and sculpture here. I can also notice the artist deliberately generates emotions in recipients by means of this work. Tolkin using the appropriate graphic gradation means builds up the tension and creates experiences with the masterly skill of a theatre director. He uses psychological stimuli. His artistic work is a search – here e.g. I found the parallel between the danger of the rock hanging of the steep wall of the quarry and the shape of the Route of Memory, depicted in the form of the stone ravine of abyss. We can see that the number of visitors is more or less constant.

While analyzing Tolkin's oeuvre through his biography one cannot fail to observe a strong correlation between them. His subsequent artistic views on the form of monuments commemorating places of genocide may have crystallized during that winter night in 1941 when together with his fellow-prisoner, Tolinski, he was trying to envision the camp area development after the fall of fascism. His later work – which he considers his mission – focuses upon the commemoration of those heroic times as well as demanding that the memory of the genocide should never perish.⁸

⁶ Author's Interview with Tolkin.

⁷ Zofia Posmysz, *Christ of Auschwitz*. (Chrystus Oświęcimski), manuscript, owned by Wiktor Tolkin.

⁸ Sławomir Sierecki, *Wybieramy gdańszczanina roku. Pamięć o przeszłości zaklęta w głazy*, "Wieczór Wybrzeża" 1968, no 159, 08.07.1968.; G. Brał, *Głazy wołać będą...*, "Tygodnik Morski" 1968, no 19, p. 1,

In one interview Tolkin said: I was advocating a symbol, a drama. I knew it had to be a huge, monumental block which must be a reminder and a warning without, however, arousing sympathy. My idea is to use symbolism. (...) ⁹ These words took shape in Tolkin's monuments erected on the site of the former Nazi concentration camps. The impact of the artistic structures was strengthened by a verbal message. He did not hesitate to use stern words intended to prick people's conscience: THEY BURNT PEOPLE HERE; IF PEOPLE / KEEP QUIET / THE STONES / WILL SHOUT and LET OUR FATE / BE A WARNING / NOT A LEGEND TO YOU and also LET OUR VOICE / CONTINUE FROM GENERATION / TO GENERATION; LET OUR FATE / BE A WARNING TO YOU. Thus the artist challenges the generations to come. He demands that posterity should try to preserve the historical past, being painfully aware of the treacherous power of oblivion. Problems concerning the nature of remembering and forgetting seem to be an important thread in the analysis of the artist's oeuvre.

The war memories seem to be etched deeply in the minds and hearts of the generation which survived the gehenna of the Occupation. This reality is confirmed in all aspects of social life, also in art. It is incomparably harder to create the memory of those events among the members of the generation which did not experience the hardships of war. Is it at all possible to talk about remembering or perhaps one should rather talk about forgetting? Or perhaps it is not memory but history? If we want to appreciate the impact of Tolkin's work and specify its social functions these questions cannot be left unanswered. By employing particular forms Tolkin – just like other significant artists working in this field – strives to engender in the contemporary recipient those emotions which were experienced by the victims of historical events – prisoners of concentration camps. This is also supposed to save memories, and thus memory but at the same time to save history. Fortunately, the issue of memory has not been neglected in recent years. Quite the contrary. Since art and culture are considered in sociological terms, this issue is repeatedly being debated. Aleida Assmann, for instance, introduces the following distinction between memory and history:

History always clearly separates the present from the past, while there is no such clearcut division as far as memory is concerned. What matters most in history is the subject of investigation. Memory, however, has a very clearly defined subject whose role is of utmost importance. History seeks truth, whereas memory transmits values and norms and selects facts ¹⁰.

These words are confirmed and at the same time refuted in the work of Tolkin. Although the sculptor does not reject subjectivism in his artistic statements, he sets great store by presenting facts. THEY BURNT PEOPLE HERE – he points the posterity. And it is true – people were really burnt there. There is no falsehood, only the unity of history and memory. Memory, therefore, is also capable of telling the truth without downplaying it through selection of facts. But does not history introduce a hierarchy of events? History, just like memory, does not shy away from norms and values. History preserves the memory of both heroic and ignominious deeds. The reader succumbs to the temptation of valuing them, builds his ideals upon them and acts accordingly.

6.; M. Gajdziński, W 25-lecie powrotu Ziemi Zachodnich do Polski. "Przekazuję heroizm tamtych dni", "Słowo Powszechne" 1970, no 85, 10.04.1970.

⁹ A. Stanisławski, W 25-lecie wyzwolenia obozu Pomnik Walki i Męczeństwa na Majdanku, "Dziennik Bałtycki" 1969, no 226.

¹⁰ Aleida Assmann, Erinnerungsräume. Formen Und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses, C.H. Beck Verlag, München 1999. and Magdalena Syriusz-Wolska, Pamiętać historię/Rememberin History, [in:] Strażnicy doków/Dock Watchers, Aneta Szyłak (ed.), Instytut Sztuki Wyspa, Gdańsk 2005. qt. after P. Piotrowski, Agorafilia. Sztuka i demokracja w postkomunistycznej Europie, Rebis, Poznań 2010, p. 157.

Monuments erected in memorial places serve multifarious functions, one of them being retelling the history of the place using the language of the history of art. Here we come close to the Casseyian notion of localization. This is why many artists, while working out the concept of a monument, carry out historical studies connected with a particular place, so that its form refers to authentic events from the past. In order to become acquainted with its history it is important not only to be familiar with various documents or scholarly verified sources but also with accounts written by the witnesses. Faced with such materials the artist matches his design with a particular place and the traces of the past preserved in the countryside. His is a difficult task of telling many individual and collective stories, of presenting the uniqueness of the place without ignoring its universality, of presenting facts, memories and emotions. This task appears to be truly Herculean. This is why so many monuments have evoked so different reactions in the recipients. But these artists aim not only at recording the history of a particular place. In an interview Tolkin clearly states his task, 'I am showing the heroism of those days'. He is therefore interested not only in preserving the historical truth or presenting a kind of 'memoirs' written by witnesses of those events but also their mentality as well as in preserving that atmosphere of those days. The most difficult to describe and also to understand are the experiences, emotions, psychological foundations of moral choices of people who lived in a different space-time.

While analyzing the role of an artist in a process of remembering one should take into account the recipient who is often neglected by theoreticians. The recipient, however, is of utmost importance for the artist. To him or her is adjusted the repertoire of forms and to him or her is addressed this unique letter from and about the past. This struggle to preserve memory is waged for his or her benefit. Who is the recipient then? An individual but also a group. They come from the past – witnesses of events – from the present but also from the future. Their being underspecified does not make it difficult to deliver the message. The language of art is universal and its meaning does not change with time. The only obstacle in appreciating the work of art is the recipient's willingness to understand it or the lack thereof. The awareness of the recipients and their curiosity to know are crucial in decoding the message of a work of art and – thanks to it – the history of the place and the history of the people – the memory about them.

Transmitting history and memory in contemporary art is not identical with their preservation. It is difficult to compare the artistic media, their impact and the way certain forms of artistic creation are received, even though they belong to the same subject matter. In the case of Tolkin's works the final decision is unequivocal – preservation and homage paid through this monumental block. The form has been clearly defined and consistently executed. The artist undoubtedly preferred the concept of memorial sculpture understood as a monumental block endowed with symbolic overtones.

The artist opened this traditional view to certain tendencies favouring reorientation in the realm of twentieth century sculpture. One must mention here the anti-illusionistic connections between the sculpture and its surroundings and its dynamic relations with the viewer which resulted in the psychologization of effects and emphasizing the fact of the existence of the experience in time. However, he decidedly rejects both accident and conceptual visions of the so-called counter-monuments.

The issue of memory and history resulting from the subject of monumental sculpture is submitted to another important force – it is enmeshed in politics. It may not have any impact either on the works created in Western Europe, or on their theoretical considerations on this matter. Polish experience, however, proves beyond doubt to what extent politics can influence art. Politics uses the propaganda function of a monument which is irrevocably bound to it. A monument as an object existing in a particular space becomes a medium transmitting certain essence, including a given outlook on life and set of values which – consequently – involves a

kind of dissonance since the sender of the message is heterogeneous. His nature is at least dualist: he is a customer and an artist. The customer, in turn, is also dichotomous, because he can be an antagonist towards the recipient, or he can be a protagonist, in that he expresses the general will of recipients. The artist, in creating a work of art, is dependent both on his patron and the recipient.

These changes of society's memory always depend on the politics and authorities ruling the country. Polish society can be said to neatly exemplify this process – the transformation of the state system being undertaken twenty years ago, it gives a good opportunity to observe those dynamic changes. The character of the society is of extreme importance in this process. In order to fully grasp this problem one should take into account numerous aspects concerning this group: mentality, religiousness, cultural differences between social classes and cultural differences between education levels.

Education has a great impact on the process of shaping the memory of the new society. In the past, during the Communist rule in Poland, information and education were being controlled in accordance with the directives of the Communist government. Nowadays the relations between the government, education and science are decidedly positive. The process of remembering is stimulated and preserved by the state administration, museums and other cultural establishments and also by the education system in Poland. But one should remember that the deciding factor is people's individual sensibility. The analysis of this factor is invariably neglected by scientists and the analytical methods employed by them unfortunately fail to prove it.

Cultural memory is a process evolving in time. The artist always presents his or her own individual memories contained in the universal cultural memory but at the same time they connect the individual and popular understanding of these problems. The artefacts enter into a dialog with the new generations of recipients and transfer individual tensions/emotions of the artist into individual feelings of viewers, which in turn shapes the popular memory of the new society.

Historical consciousness in the cultural memory is the subject of sociological research. Carried out in Poland by the Institute of Sociology, the University of Warsaw, it focusses on the transformation of the historical consciousness of Polish intelligentsia in the period 1965-1988.¹¹ The material for analysis was collected by means of questionnaires. The aspect of transformation of the historical consciousness is particularly important, because it is related to the artistic form of a sculpture. This process has two channels of transmission – official and unofficial – which have much in common. The official channel, being controlled by the state system, depends on the political situation. The ramifications of this situation are clearly visible in art: the monument commemorating the Heroes of Warsaw Uprising (in August 1944) could not have materialized because the combatants fought not only against fascism, but also against Stalinism.

The differences in the attitude towards various memorial forms are clearly visible when it comes to the division between formal and informal monuments. Poles, for instance, generally disapproved of the so-called Monuments of Gratitude for the Soviet Army erected by the government in most Polish cities and towns. On the other hand, illegal placing of crosses and lighting candles in the battlefields of the Polish Home Army was fought against by authorities. The common ground for both groups was the erection of monuments of martyrdom in the former concentration camps.

¹¹ B. Szacka, A. Sawisz, *Czas przeszły i pamięć społeczna. Przemiany świadomości historycznej inteligencji polskiej 1965-1988*, [in:] *Studia nad świadomością historyczną*, vol. 3, Instytut Socjologii Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 1990.

Monuments of martyrdom have dual nature: commemoration, and telling a story of a particular place.¹² The story is told in forms contemporary to the time of the construction of the monument. The process of shaping forms of monuments of martyrdom is documenting the process of presenting history. This aspect touches the problem of the context of places: authentic events in concentration camps and story behind the original surviving objects. Artists base their work on historical knowledge. While designing the monument they conduct historical studies and analyze survivors' accounts. Afterwards sculptors search for an artistic form which sends the symbolic message and shapes historical discourse.



¹² James E. Young, *The Art. Of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*, [in:] *The Art. of Memory, Holocaust Memorials in History*, New York 1994, Jewish Museum.