

In the Absence of Memory

I.

In the entryway of my school's library a monoprint by Gabriella Nikolic, *One Day, One Woman, One Child*, is displayed on the wall: the famous photograph of a young boy standing with his arms raised in the Warsaw ghetto forms the basis of the image, altered and dramatically over-contrasted. Red ink overlays the photograph in haphazard, violent splatters while the boy is covered in translucent white lines, both concealing and calling attention to his face. I don't know how long this image has been there or how many times I walked past the picture without noticing it. I don't know who chose to show this artwork or why, or how many other students walk through the library every day unaware of the image and its memory. I don't know what the image means to those who notice it.

Last year, the image started to challenge and confront me. I was planning to participate in a trip to Germany and Poland to study how the Holocaust is remembered throughout Europe, and as I contemplated the trip I thought intensely about photography and what it might mean to photograph these sites. I wondered whether I would bring my camera into camps, memorial sites, and museums at all. My concerns were not focused on how the camera might distract me from experiencing these sites; for me, the camera doesn't impose limitations, but rather opens a new lens on the world. I worried instead about the unavoidable, usually invisible, perspective of the photographer, the authorial and authoritative control of the camera itself. I considered ways to work around this: taking pictures in which my camera was reflected in something else, pictures with my shadow in the frame, maybe even superimposing the camera's technical settings—shutter speed, aperture, ISO, timestamp—over each image before sharing them. I wanted any viewers not

only to see my photographs, but also to confront their own perspectives, to consider their own relationship to memory, to understand that any sense of control or mastery of the past is misguided.

These issues raise questions about the ethics of documentation and representation of the Holocaust, questions that become more pressing as we move further away from the Holocaust in time. How do we remember a traumatic history that is impossible to fully archive or represent? How do we remember, and respond to, trauma that isn't our own? How are our interactions with memory mediated by authors, artists, architects, museums, public officials and institutions, and how do the perspectives and voices of these curators influence our own knowledge and perception of history?

Nikolic's picture on the wall of my library also poses these questions. As the artist's ink mars the iconic Warsaw ghetto image, it challenges the sense of reverence that sometimes surrounds the Holocaust. I learned more about Nikolic, and found that she often uses images of Holocaust victims to commemorate her own Serbian ancestors, many of whom were killed in the Holocaust (O'Malley). Rather than leave the archive untouched, she combines her own perspective, experience, and history with pre-existing photographs and documents. By blending personal and public memory, Nikolic re-creates and challenges an iconic image. Her interpretation of the photograph adds the filter of her own perspective, and asks the audience to view the picture in a different light. Nikolic calls attention to the young boy and his memory, and in doing so expresses her own history.

II.

It was not a coincidence that I noticed Nikolic's image in the library. My professor had recently shown our class the iconic Warsaw ghetto photograph in connection with our study of a Polish novel first published in 1988, Jaroslaw M. Rymkiewicz's *The Final Station: Umschlagplatz*.

In a literary counterpart to Nikolic's monoprnt, Rymkiewicz blends the boy's history into his own work by imagining that he is able to talk to and interact with the boy. The iconic photograph is again re-imagined and rendered in a new way, calling attention to the perspective of the author and the act of mediation itself.

Rymkiewicz tackles these knots of Holocaust memory and history throughout *The Final Station*, a book set in and around Warsaw at different time periods that combines history, memoir, and fiction. Rymkiewicz's book focuses on the Polish relationship to the Holocaust, examined through archival data, fiction, and the author's own childhood memories as a Christian Pole living near Warsaw during World War II. The novel asks pressing questions about Poland's past and present—questions about Polish complicity in the Holocaust, as well as about the contemporary Polish response, or lack thereof, in the period between the end of the war and 1988, just before the fall of communism.

Rymkiewicz's meditations on his own childhood relationship to the Holocaust focus on a photograph of himself as a child in Otwock, a town near Warsaw which Rymkiewicz also uses as the setting for the explicitly fictional sections of the book. Rymkiewicz was seven years old when the picture was taken, in the summer of 1942, yet he claims he has no memory of the war. The photograph is his only link to prove he was there. As Froma Zeitlin observes, this picture of Rymkiewicz as a child "haunts him throughout the work, as the single tangible sign of his own reality and also as the sign of his guilt that he knew nothing, remembers nothing" (22).

To help understand Rymkiewicz's position, Joanna Stimmel identifies *The Final Station* as a "postmemorial text" (152), following Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory as a space between memory and history, "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection" (22). Hirsch's work focuses primarily on the way children

of Holocaust survivors encounter and understand inherited trauma, and the demands this inherited trauma exacts on the lives and memories of later generations. Rymkiewicz's compulsion to reconstruct and relive the past stems from a similar postmemorial position. The past that continues to haunt the narrator is complicated by his knowledge of Christian Poles who allowed, or participated in, violence towards Jews. The unremembered past Rymkiewicz remains unable to understand, and which therefore continues to return to him, is his own early childhood in Aryan Warsaw, the very fact that there *was* an Aryan side of Warsaw. "I don't have to tell you what was done to those Jewish children," Rymkiewicz says, "Yet we Christian children could laugh and play and enjoy life. That's what I feel is so very indecent. . . . It is obscene that we survived at all" (25).

The narrator is driven by a need to understand what happened specifically in Warsaw, but by extension also what happens in any instance where such barbarism happens, to understand how his own childhood could unfold in seeming normality so close to the suffering of the Warsaw ghetto. Rymkiewicz's drive to understand this past can only occur through literary and historical documents, given the unique nature of postmemory; although the history of Warsaw is personally significant to Rymkiewicz, he has no direct memory of it. As Hirsch suggests, "postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory" because one must connect to the past through "imaginative investment and creation" (22). Rymkiewicz's "imaginative investment" in Warsaw's past is the core theme of the novel, which is concerned primarily with the consequences of engaging with the past, as well as the failure to do so.

III.

Rymkiewicz's imaginative investment becomes necessary not only because he cannot remember the war or the ghetto, but also because the historical archive is incomplete. Rymkiewicz concentrates his investigation on the Umschlagplatz, which translates roughly to "transfer square,"

an area of the Warsaw ghetto where Jews were held before deportation. He begins with a gap in historical documentation: the narrator combs libraries and archives in an ultimately futile attempt to locate a reliable map of Umschlagplatz. Polish historians, he notes, do not seem to have recognized a need to document a place that, to Rymkiewicz, marks the end of “the history of Polish Jews” (3). Rymkiewicz is asking, then, not just what Umschlagplatz looked like, but why he is unable to find out.

Rymkiewicz acknowledges that Polish citizens may occasionally think of Umschlagplatz’s history—“they may spare a compassionate thought for the victims”—yet there remains, he insists, “no evidence that Umschlagplatz has ever had any significance in the intellectual life of the Poles” (4). Jews were absent from postwar Communist Poland, leaving the documentation of Jewish history to non-Jewish Poles. *The Final Station* thus suggests not only that Poles were complicit in violence against Jews, but also that Polish historians failed to fully document this history. *The Final Station* incorporates historical and archival information throughout the narrative, yet its primary concern is not to document or even necessarily to understand the past, but rather to explore how the act of interpreting history and memory influence the present. The novel ultimately attempts not to reconstruct history, but rather to imaginatively inhabit the past, to work towards an active engagement with history that demands critical self-reflection in the present.

Since Rymkiewicz’s postmemory is so thoroughly mediated by representation, rather than experience, of the Warsaw ghetto, the novel is understandably rooted in historical and archival information. Rymkiewicz’s drive towards understanding Warsaw’s past is continually frustrated by a lack of accurate or reliable information; the presence of an unknowable past shadows and interrupts Rymkiewicz’s attempts to grasp Warsaw’s history. Stimmel notes that throughout *The Final Station* photographs, among other archival documents, “serve as primary sources for

memory retrieval but also as catalysts of the literary imagination,” which allows the narrator to “recognize the finality of the past lives depicted, grieve for the death of those pictured, and critically approach [his] own postmemorial sense of bereavement” (154-5). Yet, in a novel that opens with the failure of reliable historical documentation, one must also be reminded of what has not been photographed or recorded. In his quest to understand the Polish past, Rymkiewicz is acutely aware of archival limits. As he attempts to describe what Umschlagplatz looked like, he runs into holes and discrepancies in records, records already limited to those written in or translated into Polish. Because “Umschlagplatz no longer exists,” Rymkiewicz says, “all that survives is the words describing it” (50). Rymkiewicz discovers sources that describe Umschlagplatz in different ways: Marek Edelman states that there was only one gate into Umschlagplatz while Władysław Szpilman describes several gateways, and the reported number of buildings on Umschlagplatz ranges from two to four. Other details are not mentioned at all. The narrator is left with questions, such as the specifics of “the surface of the area commonly referred to as a courtyard. Did the deportees lie or sit on trampled grass? Bare soil? Cobblestones? Asphalt?” (57). Rymkiewicz’s portrait of Umschlagplatz is as much a record of absence and uncertainty as it is a description of the place itself. *The Final Station* routinely reminds us to be attentive to what has been left out of history or to what history cannot say—not only to remember the past, but while doing so to remain aware that what can be documented may never fully encompass what actually happened.

IV.

The absence of photographs, accurate maps, or consistent descriptions is, perhaps paradoxically, an opportunity to preserve history from a false sense of completion. While Rymkiewicz searches for accurate information, he is at times relieved by what he is unable to find:

There may well be other photos of the ramp or of Umschlagplatz. Personally, I hope that there are not. Visualizing by verbal means is to see through a semi-transparent veil. Words reveal, but they can simultaneously conceal what they reveal. A photograph is different. In a photograph we would glimpse something I strongly feel to be taboo. (151)

This preference for the “semi-transparent veil” of language might appear to contradict the narrator’s interest in understanding and reconstructing Warsaw’s history. What could the existence of such a photograph do, other than help illuminate the past? This curious hope that Umschlagplatz has not been clearly or accurately photographed, I argue, does not stem from a desire to forget or ignore the past, but rather indicates an understanding of ways in which representational realism can create a sense of mastery or closure. If photographs of Umschlagplatz were found, they might allow for an illusion of a final understanding of the past: this, for Rymkiewicz, is “taboo.” Literature, by contrast, with its unstable meaning and open interpretation, emerges as the only lens through which Rymkiewicz is able to explore and question Holocaust memory. By including the narrator’s reflections on his own work, usually through reported conversations with his wife and friends, Rymkiewicz both emphasizes and questions his position as an author. The perspective of the author is everywhere, but it is only one perspective, and it is not above scrutiny. Rymkiewicz resists the suggestion that Umschlagplatz could ever be fully or accurately represented, resists the temptation to think that any archive of the Holocaust could ever be considered complete or total.

In his understanding of Holocaust historiography, Saul Friedlander also recognizes this danger in assuming mastery of the past, and suggests that the self-awareness of the historian “should be accessible to critical reading” (53). The presence of commentary, questions, and alternative interpretations can “withstand the need for closure,” working towards an understanding

of the Holocaust that may be able to encompass the traumatic, unresolved nature of such a history (Friedlander 53).

By exposing and avoiding an impulse towards closure, Rymkiewicz reminds us that the critical self-reflection demanded by engagement with the past must remain constant and continuous. It is not enough to read and understand the historian's interpretation of the past, we must allow the traumatic memory into our own lives, to shape how we perceive and organize the present. As James Young points out, the existence of archives, museums, or memorials does not always indicate remembrance; the "meticulous reconstruction" of memory can allow "the memorial operation [to remain] self-contained and detached from our daily lives" (5). It is not enough to know what happened or why, the past must also become integrated into our internal, spiritual lives.

It is fitting, then, that Rymkiewicz turns to fiction in his attempts to engage with history. Through fiction, both the author and the reader are brought closer to personal narratives not typically available to history. Fiction not only compensates for an absence of fact, but also participates in the past. To achieve this, Rymkiewicz develops "a kind of Jewish alter ego" through the figure of Icyk Mandelbaum, a fictionalized writer perhaps based on Isaac Bashevis Singer (Zeitlin 9). As the narrator observes, imagining what Mandelbaum might have thought or said is a method of critical reflection:

Once modified and inserted in Icyk's head, my thoughts undergo a process of change to become the common property of Icyk and myself. In other words, they are still my thoughts, but they have been scrutinized and interpreted from a distance and from a different perspective, for me quite unprecedented, rather as though I had been using ... Icyk Mandelbaum's pince-nez as a field glass. (17)

Icyk is first introduced in 1937 at a boarding house in Otwock, along with a group of other characters. Much of the fictional sections describe victims' experiences just before ghettoization; Rymkiewicz imagines what life might have been like for Jews before the war, remembering victims through their lives, rather than only in destruction. Through his fictional project, Rymkiewicz moves beyond the surface level of facts and historical data, and towards an internal, personal understanding of the past. This intimate portrayal of what the past might have been like not only changes the narrator's thoughts, but also allows the past a continued spiritual presence in the reader.

V.

Rymkiewicz resists the tendency to forget, to leave memory self-contained in its memorialization, by focusing on "double or treble time" (181). Time becomes multi-layered as Rymkiewicz considers Krochmalna Street in Warsaw: "the atmosphere here is hard to describe, probably because one is simultaneously walking through pre-war Warsaw, the ghetto, and the Warsaw of today" (181). Rymkiewicz observes that people tend not to "seek deeper insight" when "given a rare chance to sense the dual or treble density of time, to capture the sense of being in several temporal strata at once" (181). He encourages the reader to reflect on Warsaw as it was in the past, and to imagine how the city's previous inhabitants might have thought about time and history.

Throughout the book, Rymkiewicz remains conscious that it is impossible to recreate the past as it actually was. Rymkiewicz is aware not only of the limits of archival knowledge, but also of the limits of his own imagination. The narrator interrupts his fictional story to point out: "I obviously cannot know what Icyk was thinking fifty years ago.... I am therefore with some sense of embarrassment putting my own thoughts into his head" (16). By foregrounding the limits of

what an author can know about his characters, the novel navigates the difficult demands of postmemory, the paradox of remembering what we cannot recollect and must only imagine.

On almost every level of its narration, *Umschlagplatz* resists the impulse towards closure or finality. Historical discrepancies remain unresolved, moral and ethical questions go unanswered. Rymkiewicz resists the urge to use his authorial control to achieve a narrative catharsis not allowed by history: the protagonist of the fictional sections of the novel, Icyk, imagines returning to Poland but never does so, leaving Icyk's relationship to his history unfinished and unwritten. Rymkiewicz remains unable to map *Umschlagplatz*. His childhood memory, symbolized by the photograph of himself in Otwock, remains absent.

In the novel's final pages, Rymkiewicz reflects on "the photograph everyone knows" of the boy in the Warsaw ghetto with his hands raised, the same one Nikolic uses as the basis of her monoprint (324). Rather than reproduce the photograph, Rymkiewicz describes it, focusing the audience on how the image is represented, on his own interpretation, rather than on the picture itself, challenging what might have become a static mode of viewing as a result of the picture's iconic status. Although historians are unsure of the boy's exact identity, Rymkiewicz is drawn to one proposed name: Artur Siemiatek, born in 1935, the same year as Rymkiewicz. Rymkiewicz returns to the picture of himself in Otwock as a child, and imagines that he and the boy are standing together: "Artur is my contemporary.... We stand side by side, he in this photo taken in the Warsaw ghetto, I in the photo taken on the high platform in Otwock. We may assume that both photographs were taken in the same month, mine a week or so earlier" (325-6).

In his reflection on the photograph, Rymkiewicz acknowledges that the boy is frozen, in both time and terror, and cannot put his arms down:

“You’re tired,” I say to Artur. “It must be very uncomfortable standing like that with your arms in the air. I know what we’ll do. I’ll lift my arms up now, and you put yours down. They may not notice. But wait, I’ve got a better idea. We’ll both stand with our arms up.” (326)

For as much as he might want to, Rymkiewicz cannot bear the burden of Artur’s pain, cannot heal his wounds. Yet, Rymkiewicz can still raise his own arms, even though Artur will never lower his. If *Umschlagplatz* offers any final answer to the question of living with the enduring presence of the past, it is perhaps the imperative that we continue to find ways to stand with our arms up, even when doing so will not allow someone else to lower theirs. Rymkiewicz asks us not to ignore what we cannot fix, asks us not to be silent even when we are unable to help.

VI.

In the end, I didn’t go to Germany and Poland. At the end of the semester, I got sick and was in a hospital, mostly unconscious, during the weeks my classmates were on the trip. I didn’t find out how I would photograph memorial sites, represent my own perspective, or exist in the kind of triple-layered time Rymkiewicz describes. I can perhaps imagine the pictures I might have taken. But I am also, on some level, relieved that they don’t exist, that my experience of those places is still undetermined. It’s strange, even, to think of the trip as having been missed; I wonder how much of what I might have seen would already have been missing or forgotten.

The trip still exists in some ways, not the one my friends and classmates went on but my own, a vacant memory layered over the time I spent in the hospital. Medical records prove I was hospitalized for three weeks. My parents, sister, and doctors might be able to remember what happened, but I can’t. I have impressions of confusion and terror, and I should perhaps be glad that my brain was unable to process the rest. Anything I can write about the hospital or the trip I never

went on will never be wholly adequate, but I feel a need to articulate it anyway, to release my vague and absent memories into language.

Every time I walk through my library and see Nikolic's artwork I am pulled back into these varied layers of time, memory, and perspective—even if for only a brief moment, this unresolved and still evolving history continues to find its way into my life.

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