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Subjective history of the Center „Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN”

In 1992 in Lublin a group of people creating Theater NN started its activity in Brama Grodzka (Grodzka Gate) in the very center of the place which was emanating with the past about which we knew nothing then.

In order to have better understanding of the activity of “Brama Grodzka – Theater NN” Center it is necessary to realize what happened in Lublin during the last war when the Germans murdered the Jewish population of the city and the Jewish district was destroyed. Majdanek, the German death camp localized in the vicinity of Lublin became the symbol of those times.

In the course of time the Lublin people have forgotten about their Jewish neighbors. When we were initiating our activity in the beginning of 90’s in Brama Grodzka (Grodzka Gate), which was the passage in between the Jewish and Christian districts of Lublin we had also no knowledge about the Lublin Jews. We were unaware that this humongous, empty space just next to the Gate is the remnant after the Jewish town. In that place where for years there were houses, synagogues and streets we have now big parking lot, new roads and lawns. Large part of this area was just covered with layer of concert. The memory of the Jewish city all together with foundations of Jewish buildings is now hidden under this concrete cast and our Gate leads to the nonexistent town – the Jewish Atlantis.

Once we became aware of the history of this site we gained convenience that we have to tackle somehow with this problem and answer the fundamental question about the sense of our presence precisely in this spot. How can you live in Lublin without any knowledge about the culture and history of those who were making almost one third of the city population. Of course the process of gaining this awareness and growing up to any decisions lasted some longer time. In the meantime many other important things have been going on.

The beginnings of activity

So in 1992 we became the hosts of the Gate and our responsibility for the site has also begun. We had to bring life to those walls. Not only through the theater but also through non artistic activities.

Brama Grodzka was at that time a ruin and with the adjacent houses it was looking more like a grimy shack than a place for any cultural activity. There came countless problems,

questions and obstacles but at the same time it was a perfect situation for a group of zealots who wanted to do something for their city.

I have soon realized that the theater only is not enough to face the arising problems. Everything I was doing before – until 1990, all my presence in theater was growing out of rebellion towards the political system in which I had to live with feeling of very deep personal disagreement. After 1990 that epoch was defiantly finished and the period of constructing something new started. It was time to take part in common responsibility for this new getting born reality. For the first time in tens of years there was a space for authentic social activity. We had a feeling that we can have influence on how our Mała Ojczyzna (Little Homeland) will look like.

The first years of our presence in the Gate was the most “heroic” but also “romantic” time of our activity. We were getting transformed from artists into animators. In this way we have started our own “grassroots work” and to do so we needed something more then just the theater. That was our path: from informal theater group contesting the reality into our own institution, which was able by its activity to brake the stereotype of old so called cultural propagation centers. This experience realized me that the social life requites institutions; they help to enhance our activities, they help to create order in the social sphere around us. They, thanks to interesting ideas and their realization decrease the social entropy in the world chaotic by nature. The Memory connected with place where we were situated became for us the basic element putting order to the social sphere around us.

The large number of organized events was very characteristic of the first years of the Theater activity. Among those were: sessions, authors meetings, exhibits, theater plays, movie screenings and concerts. The aim was to drug attention of the most possible number of people to this part of the city which was non attractive and considered dangerous. It was important to mark our presence on the cultural map of Lublin. At the same time it was an element of looking for our own program. We also wanted to show to ourselves and the others how much can be done by little group of people if only they are well organized and are willing to dream.

The meetings of cultures

The leading project at that time period were the “Meetings with cultures”. In this program we were relating mainly to the location of Lublin in the border zone of East and West – to its multicultural tradition. The participants of those meetings were artists from Central-Eastern and Western Europe from Lithuania, Bialorus, Ukraine, Russia, Crimean, Czech, Slovakia, Hungary, France, Germany and Israel. In the first years of this project there were mainly the

presentations of Ukrainian artists. The Theater established very close relations with artistic circles in Lviv and Kiev supporting their activities through the promotion action in Poland. We were re-establishing in the scale of our possibilities the broken bonds between Poland and Ukraine. The “Meetings with Orthodox Church” and presentations of cultural heritage of Lublin Jews were integral parts of “Meetings with cultures”.

The gradual recognition of the path we took was coming in 1994 when our theater was granted one of the main prizes for our project “Memory - Place - Presence” in a very prestigious contest of Foundation for Culture “Little Homelands – Tradition for the Past” The work with this project forced me to describe our activities and to draw sketches for development of our Center. I understood then that in the way I think about my work there are the three major words, three reference points, which model world around me: memory, place, presence.

This was my first serious attempt to describe the program of NN Theater and the things we want to do in the place where we were located. At that time I have started to use the term Little Homeland in relation to the place of our activity.

The memory of the Jewish city

After some time with tens of projects already realized I started to realize very clearly that the major topic for our Center shall be the reality around us, the things which are at the hand reach - this void after the Jewish City which is visible from our windows. A Jewish author from Lithuania Gigorij Kanowicz have told me once that there are artists who try to describe the whole world but they can't even tell a word about themselves. There are also such artists who speak only about themselves, about their street and at the same time about the whole world. This was an important indication. Of course the Jewish themes were in our program from the very beginning when we realized history of our location but some time was needed to grow up to understand that this shall be our main interest.

So the consciousness of extermination of the Jewish city and the lack of memory about it was more and more dominant in me. I wanted to do something with this as a artist but on the other hand by facing the war reality here I started to doubt in sense and possibilities of art and language of theater.

My hesitation is well reflected in the words of Jacek Leociak “... There has never been such an deep abyss in between the scale of the experience and the means to express it. Never before the literature as the domain of fiction, certain convention and illusions seemed to be so inappropriate facing the experience of extermination...” Or the words of Czeslaw Milosz

from his speech when he received *doctorate honoris causa* from Rome University in 1992: "Memory is a big burden, but I can't free myself from it and the XX century exists in me with all the images of group ill fascination and mass crimes (...). Now, just at the end of second millennium I constantly ask myself how much of all those events have found reflections in the books we have written. Unfortunately the calamities of people, their suffering, their empty hopes, their death once you multiply it all by the numbers which look terrifying even in the statistics it all creates a phenomena so horrendous that there is no literature capable to describe it. (...) We just notice that the artistic means of expression withdraw one after another. (...) and that looking back into our century we face the undescribed reality, so that the young generations would never find out how it had been in the past".

I have felt a complete hopelessness in finding good artistic form to challenge this enormous void left after the Jewish town. So I waited, but as an animator I have started with all our actions to aim at commemoration of presence and extermination of Lublin Jews.

In 1998 and 1999 we created two large documentary exhibits in our Center ("The Great Book of the City" and "Portrait of a Place") about the city history before 1939. Those exhibits created a specific Theater of Memory which was presenting the unique photographs, city maps and documents showing the Polish-Jewish history of Lublin. Those installations became the permanent exhibit and at the same time the arrangement of the Brama Grodzka interior. The very important element is the Model of the Lublin Old City Complex with Jewish district. The model shows the scale of destruction caused to the city organism during WW II.

In our attempts to save memory of Lublin of the period before Extermination we have started in 1998 to record the memory recollections of its inhabitants. This is the way how we have created the "Oral History" project tanks to which we save the personal histories of hundreds of people from being forgotten. During 10 years we have managed to record and put on-line over 3000 hours of different memories. Those saved memories are the important part of the spiritual heritage of the city. At the same time when the "Oral History" was beeing realized we have started to organize many educational programs for students teachers and culture animators.

From Theater to Institution

The Theater did not disappear from our Center although for few years there were no new plays created. The experience gathered during theater work was the driving force to

create many nonstandard events and projects. I took the theater to life. The character of exhibits in the Center interior were also rooted in theater.

It is worth to notice that in that time out major point of interest shifted from being impresario of regular cultural events into creating our own author program. Witold Chmielewski described our search in a very interesting way: "The special place – Theater NN in the Gate which is called Jewish. The meetings are organized in the theater room, on the stage, with audience and listeners. The room is constructed like in Reduta of Osterwa or Limanowski – stage at the level of floor, audience higher. This is a meeting place for theater and film creators, writers, poets, musicians, artists, actors, journalists, theoreticians and sociologists of culture, publishers, pedagogues, professors and students, creators and animators of culture. This is how this mysterious theater is – place of creative expression and place of very serious and deeply understood and practiced culture, it connects in some way people and phenomena which seem to be in deep opposition. The Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians, Czechs, Slovaks, Russians, Roma, Lithuanians, Jews, Germans. Small cameral theater and modern electronic equipment making professional center of culture. Poetic, focused thoughts, live expression, theater rehearsals and the everyday hard base work, major refurbishment undergoing".

The mile stone in creating a new type institution was the work over "The Great Book of the City" exhibit. Its program was at the intersection of scientific, museum, documentation, education and artistic activities. Thanks to that our work was more interdisciplinary and gained new quality. We were creating a slightly anarchic institution with multidimensional tasks, which was ready to realize new and nonstandard ideas. It was a sort of "ideas incubator" created at the model of "business incubator."

We can also describe the things we do as "laboratory", "laboratory or memory". In the notion of laboratory there is the essence of our activity – search, experiment, discovering the new. It is amazing when the knot or rather amalgam of many activities produces an important social effect. This is a sort of social alchemist work.

From the perspective of time it is visible now that our outside of theater experiences and expressing ourselves not only through art gave the new sense and perspectives to our work. The restoration work of the center premises has linked us strongly with this place. Experiencing the prose of renovation and construction we have all sensed this place better, it was like archeology of memory. "Challenging" the Gate, with its surrounding have touched and transformed us all.

The path we have covered from an informal theater group to an independent cultural institution is reflecting the period of the 90-ties. I think that some day it will be an interesting material for sociologists and historians. Our activity was connected with historical and socio-political transformation, which was one of the most important decades of the contemporary Polish history. The whole atmosphere of that time is contained in our program and activity. Our path to independence, the mechanism of local democracy in action, persuading single city council members, parties or commissions to create new local government cultural unit was very educative, interesting but at most difficult.

The other interesting topic for a future researcher is our program evolution, entering different activities – looking for our own reflection, searching for our path on which the non artistic activities started to push the theater to the second set.

“The Gate” – around values

When I look back into our achievements I am getting more and more convinced that something like serving the good case does exist and people taken from Zeromski prose are needed. People, who used to be called intelligentsia, who had the sense of social importance of their work. Those will be the people to decide about the future of Poland. In the times of hardship they are the ones who can mobilize their milieu to action without considering their own carriers or money. I am deeply convinced that the world we live in constantly needs great social workers with their romantic dream about justice, solidarity and equality of chances. Bogumil Luft wrote: “many of the organizations which were created in the 90-ties, bears the stigma of idealism and spirit originating from Polish intelligentsia. Many people engaged in this process prologue in this way the times of fighting for freedom. The form of those activities reflects the new times – most of the active people once given freedom started to open private companies, idealists created foundations, societies and institutions – their own workshops to work for the common social gain”.

The Center indicates to people some patterns of behavior through solving problems which are normally unnoticed and treated with indifference. Many things must be done disinterestedly because they are valuable and at the same time they teach us and others a no egoistic existence in this world. Here we approach the topic of the role of Polish intelligentsia. In the hard times a group of young and well educated people undertakes the tasks with knowledge that there will not be any financial or career gratification. The thing that directs them is mostly the sense of great social importance of those activities.

Francois Perroux wrote in the beginning of 60's in his classic book about contemporary capitalism; "Every capitalist society functions normally due to certain social sectors which are not penetrated or motivated by the idea profit and craving for gain. If any high functionary, soldier, clerk, priest, artist or scientist would be oriented towards such ideas, the society will fall and every form of economy will be endangered".... It is the social interest to protect and develop institutions which exist not for financial gain but to educate the society".

Our Center is here a good example as a sort of Education Center. Our task is not only to collect and provide access to documents about the nonexistent, Polish-Jewish Lublin. The task is greater focusing on education of the young generation, which more and more intensively loses its local culture identity. Only the emotional bond with the particular place and its history can build the responsibility for their "Little Homeland".

The Gate – The Arc of Memory

Through the years of our activity the Gate became a place like an Arc of Memory where the old photos, documents and relations are protected for the next generations. This empty space close to the Gate became for the NN Theater a natural site to realize artistic activities which reveal the memory of the past but represent also the mourning of the victims of Genocide.

Czesław Miłosz expressed and emphasized few times that after the Genocide the thing that remains is "the soil which is burdened, blooded, profaned" Commenting on the thought of Miłosz Jan Błoński in the famous essay "The poor Poles look at the Ghetto" wrote: "The blood has remained in the walls, seeped into the soil. It has also entered into ourselves, into our memory. So we must cleanse ourselves, and this means we must see ourselves in the light of truth. Without such an insight, our home, our soil, we ourselves, will remain tainted. This is the sense of the words of the poet. (...) This blood demands memory, prayer and justice. (...) Poetry and literature or more generally the common memory and consciousness cannot forget this bloody and hideous defilement. It cannot pretend that it never occurred... (...) The contamination and profanation of Polish soil took place and the duty to cleanse ourselves is still the obligation. Although on this cemetery one thing is necessary, it is the duty to see our past in the light of truth."

The work with documentation materials (photos, maps, oral histories) and gradual maturing and looking for a new form to express my emotions and thoughts has led me to initiate artistic actions carried away in the city space connected with the Genocide. The lost

memory was regained by presenting the symbolic meaning of this city space. I called those actions “Memory Mysteries”. There were among them “One Land - Two Temples”(2000), “The Day of Five Prayers” (2000), “The Mystery of Light and Darkness” (2002, 2006-2008), “Letters to the Ghetto” (2002-2008), “Mystery of Szeroka Street” (2001), “The Poem about the Place” (2002-2004). Those are my “Dziady”- the evocation of spirits. It is impossible to understand the sense of majority of those artistic actions without spirits and stories about them.

Exhibition “The Primer” (2003)

I think that life of every man, including my own has its unrepeatability composition – we must only know how to read it. Now I see clearer the links among many events of my life. The things that are lost in the everyday rush or seem to be incidental appear with the perspective of years to be more and more complete composition. The Gate was waiting for me and I was growing into it. I was brought up close to Majdanek. Until today I feel in me the eeriness of this place although I was understanding nothing of it. Those large barbed wired spaces, watch towers, barracks, skulls on info boards and the building with large chimney.... When I moved to some other district the image of Majdanek got blurred. As an adult I came to the Gate, just next to the place where those who were taken to the camps including Majdanek had been living for years. I have realized that my life made a circle from Majdanek to the Gate. From Death to Life.

Then I have started to hear but also remind myself some old, once heard stories of Jewish children. First was the little boy from Kamionka. This story appeared in my life when I was a student in primary school. His history was told once during class by my older teacher. She was the eyewitness of the war in Kamionka close to Lublin. She saw a little Jewish boy being led to execution by a German soldier. This little boy’s hair turned white within few minutes. The teacher passed away many years ago and I am the only one who remembers and tells the story of this little boy.

The other little Jewish boy was called Henio Zytomirski. He was born in Lublin in 1932 on Szewska street very close to Grodzka Gate. I saw few of his pictures which had been taken every year by his parents. We can see on them Henio who is one, two, three years old. The last photo was taken on one of the streets of Lublin in May 1939. There he stands in knee-length socks over the entrance to some building. In September that year he was to go the first class of the primary school – he had never gone he was killed in the gas chamber of Majdanek in November 1942.

Those two stories of Jewish children keep troubling me. In my memories I was also back to my childhood in the vicinity of Majdanek. I had a feeling that I have to do something with this. This is how the idea to create an exhibit about children in Majdanek came about. I have called it “The Primer” and all those stories became a part of this exhibit. I describe this all to stress strongly how important my emotions are in my activities. Those are those emotions which I try to pass on to the others.

Letters to the Ghetto (2001)

In March 2001 on the occasion of another anniversary of the liquidation of the Lublin ghetto we send from “Grodzka Gate - Theater NN” few tens of letters to the random non existing pre war addresses in Jewish part of Lublin. Of course the letters could not have been delivered and they came back with official annotations: “recipient unknown” , “no such address”. We tried to touch the void after the Jewish city through such actions. From 2002 among the recipients of our send letters was also Henio Zytomirski.

“Lights in the Darkness – Righteous Among the Nations” (2008)

The oral relations of people decorated with “Righteous Among the Nations” medal have exceptional meaning among all those of time of Genocide. Those were the Righteous who were able to stand against dominative evil by saving the life of the Jews at the danger of their own lives. Their deeds were like light in the total darkness. For this reason the project to document and process their stories and regaining memory about them was called “Lights in the Darkness – Righteous Among the Nations” The same title was given to the book collecting their memories.

The stories of the Righteous are still very little known. Often the Righteous themselves and their families don’t perceive their war time deeds as something worth to be proud of. They prefer not to talk about it.

This raises our deepest disagreement – we would like to change it and we hope that our actions will be helpful in this change.

We believe that the stories published in the book ”Lights in the Darkness – The Righteous Among the Nations” would return to the places where they had happened and will come across their “caretakers” – those who will not allow them to be forgotten. The results of the described project were also the Mystery “Memory of the Righteous – Memory of the Light” (2008) and the exhibit “Memory of the Righteous – Memory of the Light” (2008)

Other activities – internet

Internet is at this moment the most important media which allows everybody to be present in the global system of information flow and exchange. It is happening on our eyes when the internet resources are becoming the independent sphere of nowadays civilization. Internet gives to its users the every day newer and grater possibilities to participate in culture and gain access to diversified information.

Internet is also the great media to tell about the city and its history. This is why our Center works to create an internet portal which will be a multi layer and multimedia narration about Lublin using the most advanced technology. This is how the internet narration about Lublin will be created, about its unique atmosphere but also about its history and cultural heritage.

In the curse of many years of our Center constructing the portal “Lublin. The Memory of a Place” we have collected in the databases thousands of different texts and great number of documentation materials. Among the others there are priceless recordings of relations of city inhabitants / “Oral History”/. The educational value of the portal shall be particularly stressed.

Internet Education

Thanks to the portal the inhabitants , especially students and teachers have an easy access to knowledge about history and culture of the city but also to other useful information. This creates opportunities to overcome disproportion in the education level between the large and small cities but also between the schools with different education quality. All the research indicates that students who use more internet have better results at school. Our portal demonstrates how to use the accumulated knowledge in practical activities for the sake of place where we all live in. /for example program of our Center “The World Centers”/

Cultural Education – media

The program of the Center in the course of time was more and more linked with the needs of school. Our educational offer especially in the sphere of cultural heritage created support for teachers and students. Let’s mention here about Media Education Program with its part “Meeting with a document” which promoted document movies and radio reports. The aim of this project is to teach conscious usage of media offer (including internet) and to create defense mechanisms from threats brought by living in global village and global network.

Trying to challenge the mentioned problems two departments of our Center were created: Laboratory of New Media and Laboratory of Education and Animation.

Narrating history

The program of Oral History has led us naturally towards the world of narrated relation. We have discovered for ourselves the invisible tradition of narrating history. I have started to consider whether it would be still possible to arrange an authentic meeting in between a modern media educated spectator and a person narrating certain history. Someone who comes to meet people and says: Listen I want to tell you a story! How to gain their attention? I have come to the conclusion that the narration itself will need to be presented in some theatrical way. I was convinced about this path being right while flicking through some source documents about how did the folk storytellers narrated their stories. We started with Witold Dąbrowski the rehearsals based on the traditional forms of history narration being equipped with few beautiful Jewish folk stories and prose of I.B. Singer. This was how few theater plays were created and Witold Dąbrowski himself appeared to be great and unusual storyteller.

The first three theater plays: “Once upon a time” , “About Fajwel who was looking for himself” and “Taibele and her daemon” created a sort of trilogy. Each of those stories was narrated with the accompaniment of different musical instrument: accordion, double-bass and clarinet. One of the critics, Grzegorz Józefczuk wrote: “The performance doesn’t require stage setting, special lights, electronic equipment, more it doesn’t require stage. Although it is a poor theater - from suitcase (instrument case), the actor and musician can magically create a whole abundance of means of expression. The performances are charming with their lightness and wit they impress with the level of professionalism (...).

In 2009 we had the first edition of “The Wandering Meeting with Story” which was the journey retracing the I.B. Singer stories in different small towns of Lublin region. In few tens of such places W. Dąbrowski presented narrations based on the authors stories.

Publications

It is worth to mention about the publications of our Center , especially the periodical “Scriptores”. Some of its issues were devoted to: Józef Czechowicz, Józef Łobodowski, Anna Langfus, Władysław Panas, the Jewish city of Lublin, or the reflection about the city space. Those publication create a way to bring order to our knowledge about the city but also to show the young generation the values which are really important and fundamental.

The city with its need for development must remember about its past. The continuity of ideas, thoughts and activities is the element crucial in culture. Nothing grows on the desert and from nothing. There has always been some others before us , who have done something and created some ideas. The conscious relations with the past and dialoguing with it can be called “The Culture of Memory” So in this way many of our actions are just creating “The culture of Memory”

Conclusion

Let the conclusion be a short text which was created over ten years ago (1997?,1998?) when I was trying to understand the sense of my existence in the Gate:

“We never choose the time or place where we are to live our lives. In this incredibly beautiful and cruel world we are just guests and wonderers.

From where?

Where to?

Why particularly this city?

This street?

This Gate?

This little room over the Gate?

It is here, in Grodzka Gate, called also the Jewish Gate which used to be the passage in between the Christian and Jewish town, where we try to understand what is the meaning of this place to us today, what is its message. Here we talk about books. About poetry. About art. In the turmoil and chaos of the everyday live we try to protect the sense and order of the world. It is here, in this room over the Gate, where occasionally we become the artists who try to cast away the curtain of grayness and tiredness. Unveiling our theater.

It is here, in this place we have made many friends, we have learned a lot, we have lived through a lot. It was The Grodzka Gate who gave us this beautiful journey.

Without her we would have never start the path.”

Translated by: Tomasz Cybulski