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The Grodzka Gate - NN Theatre Centre in Lublin: Between Oral History and Storytelling

Oral Culture

According to Bruno de La Salle's experience, living word has its own energy and power; sometimes it can be a game, but is also a useful skill, the oldest and the user-friendly human instrument¹.

Oral history and storytelling are the most essential types of interactive art based on using words in the "Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre" Centre's activities. Academically, there is a possibility of contextual definition which involves the 'oral history' discipline. Since 'storytelling' has no elaborate designation, it is necessary to point out some parallels between oral history and storytelling, as these expressions might also sound miscellaneous without proper exemplification. First of all, they are two unique methods of telling stories, which have developed in the United States of America. Nowadays oral history is a kind of historical discipline which collects human memories as important testimonies on former times and people. In fact, 'storytelling revival' is the whole movement connected with retelling fairy-tales and legends (or telling own stories) using methods close to theatrical type. On the whole, it is perceived as an entertainment, an art, while 'oral history' supports documental approach. However 'storytelling', mostly in France, has public and educational denotation. Yet Tomasz Pietrasiewicz, the creator and manager of the NN Theatre, links two methods intuitively with imperative educative results- most of schools in the Lublin Region are seen as active participants of every particular event organised by "Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre" Centre.

Choosing narrative in additional to artistic activities is the first step to create a story - like exhibitions or quasi-performances on the street, the so-called "Memory Mysteries", which commemorate the nonexistent Jewish district in Lublin. There are numerous various ways of telling a story and that is for instance, by telling, acting, painting or singing. It is believed that "to tell is to

¹ www.clio.org

be". The style and the form is inside of every human being. The substance of the speaker and the receiver is also very important, as we can divide the art of dialogue into the art of telling stories/giving testimonies and the art of listening to them.

Both techniques are based on face-to-face contact. Indeed, oral history is a method which can be used as a part of educational work; on the other hand, storytelling is rather a kind of overexposed art today. The "Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre" Centre in Lublin has linked two different models of educational and artistic activities making use of both comparable as well as incoherent methods. The distinctive feature of the Centre's activity is transforming these techniques into artistic doings². Testimonies can be treated as an interesting documentary source in education, which is important for cross-cultural and cross-generation dialogue. Finally, they are exploited in practice while being presented in street quasi-performances or exhibitions.

Currently it is possible to observe that art based on documentary sources (theatre, cinema, exhibitions) is steadily gaining more popularity. There are more and more storytellers wishing to tell stories about their own lives. It is rooted in human immaterial heritage: before written language became common, people had been telling stories generally focused on the history of vital ancestry. The whole idea is strongly entrenched in 'orality', 'primary orality' as well as in 'oral tradition'. Communities have always liked listening to tales, legends as well as individual histories. Allan Nevins says:

Oral history is one of latest and most promising of these precautions, and already it has saved from death's dateless (and updatable) night much that the future will rejoice over and cherish. In hardly less degree than space exploration, oral history was born of modern invention and technology³.

A researcher also adds that it is a highly adventurous and entertaining task. At every turn people are faced with a new experience, a fresh view of history, gain more and more knowledge of human personality⁴.

A significant aspect of oral history is that it can tell others details about essential things, both important and trivial people but from their own individual standpoint, as this is an oral source of personal reminiscence⁵.

² In most artistic projects conducted by NN Theatre, oral history has been used continuously. For example on 16th March, during the anniversary of the liquidation the Jewish ghetto in Podzamcze area in Lublin, young people from local schools read aloud the names and surnames of the last 4 000 Jewish inhabitants who had lived in the ghetto (before its definite liquidation in 1942). The event has taken place outside of the Grodzka Gate since 2001.

³ Allan Nevins, Oral History: How and Why It Was Born. London 1968, p.30

⁴ Ibid, s. 31

⁵ Gwyn Prins, Oral History: New perspectives on historical writing. Edited by Peter Burke, Cambridge 1995, p. 120.

Speaking of new technology, Internet users are able to listen to the testimony in mp3 format or view the photos or videos on the Grodzka Gate's website. A document such as a picture assures the reader that storytelling and oral history have analogous characteristics, involving often emotional language and face to face contact (between audience and storyteller or interviewer and interviewee). What is more, the tone of the voice, facial expression, gesture, a smile, eye contact, showing compassion for somebody - all these can turn a speech/conversation into a hard-luck story. A supplementary idea of the project is, by using storytelling and oral history techniques to cause major consequences. These include improving the art of conversation between youth and older generation and progress in multicultural and multi-religious dialogue- issues which still remain extremely problematical and complicated.

"Oral History" Project in the Grodzka Gate

Since 1998 the "Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre" Centre has already collected over 650 testimonies about Jewish cultural heritage, multicultural Lublin, pre-war times and inhabitants in its "Oral History" program⁶. In the Grodzka Gate (also called the Jewish Gate), the symbol of nonexistent Jewish quarter and its inheritance, many events based on oral history take place. Testimonies are used in quasi-performances and exhibitions, where they are a major document and enforce a certain atmosphere.

The methodology of the Grodzka Gate is truly noteworthy as the testimonies are not only accessible on website⁷, but there is also a full range of alternative options to hear voices from audio recordings and learn more about the speakers from additional reading materials. Generally the speakers are elderly people who remember pre-war Lublin and the Jewish district of the town. More to the point, the Centre collects testimonies of other citizens who created or still create the culture in the Lublin Region. Some speakers' memories concern "Solidarity" or the fateful days of 1981 in Poland. In this way the "Grodzka Gate" Centre gathers local history and heritage.

Oral history. The ramifications for art education

Various commemorations, so called 'Mysteries', have been arranged since 2000 and they include the commemoration of liquidation of two ghettos in Lublin (9th November, International Day

⁶ The section responsible for recording and rewriting testimonies in the "Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre" Center is "Oral History" section. It was founded in the beginning of 1998. Some programmes in this section include Tailor's Street 41, The portrait of the Place, March 1968. Lost friendship, The freedom of word.

⁷ www.historiamowiona.tnn.pl

Against Fascism and Antisemitism and 16th March, the beginning of Action Reinhardt in Lublin). On Holocaust Memorial Day (19th April) "Letters to Henio" event has been taking place since 2005. The commemorations consist of reading of oral history aloud, listening to testimonies and other documents collected by the Centre. It is necessary to add that all these celebrations happen in urban space, particularly in the empty voids of the now nonexistent Jewish district. What is more, the artistic-educational events are enforced with powerful symbolism of light, which emitomises memory, attendance, responsibility and darkness - in other words: oblivion, death, the past and the Holocaust. The common point is "the last lamp" of the non-existent Jewish quarter, which shines all day and night thanks to Tomasz Pietrasiewicz, who found it and managed to turn it into a symbol. This icon is used in almost every action. For instance, during "The Mystery of Light and Darkness", which takes place on 16th March, the electricity is switched off for 5 minutes in Podzmacze area (the area in close proximity of the Grodzka Gate, where Jewish community used to live). The only lamp, the last street lamp of the former Jewish quarter, shines as a sign of remembrance.

Tomasz Pietrasiewicz says:

Essential and often hidden part of cultural heritage is the memory in human testimonies. In order to save it for the next generations, NN Theatre has started a long-term project of registering these memories and commemorating them. The whole idea can be expressed in a simple slogan: "Retell us your story and we will write it down and preserve it". Professional literature calls this method 'oral history'- the process of preserving history by typing it down and handing it over to next generations. In this way we became collectors and "writers" of the stories describing everyday life of the town and of those depicting dramatic events. Registered emotional stories are the main part of the town's history. It is not a handbook history but history relating individual human lives. It is coming into existence in a form of a huge and multithreaded "Spoken Book of the Town of Lublin Retold", with hundreds of 'small histories'. People talk about their daily life and its spirit; they recollect their own neighbours, homes, the nearby streets; they bring back images from childhood and the atmosphere of the past. Inhabitants remember also traumatic experiences. Gathered memories are a crucial historical document nowadays. A document, which will be useful in the future for historians, sociologists and philologists⁸.

Oral testimonies are used as a background (sounds) of exhibition made in the "Grodzka Gate" Centre. Its aim is to revivify the part of pre-war Lublin nonexistent now. A visitor can read printed testimonies as well as hear the power of oral language and memories. "The Portrait of the Place" is the name of permanent exposition which is situated in the Centre. Composed of photographs,

⁸ Archive material. "Grodzka Gate- NN Theatre" Centre (http://tnn.pl/Tradycja opowiadania,1704.html).

literary texts (including testimonies), recorded sounds (oral history) and a model scale showing the pre-war town, it can be a paradigm which combines telling (oral testimony, document) and retelling (storytelling using documents). A famous Polish poet, Julia Hartwig, is one of the heroes of the exhibition. She recalls Lublin, the place where she grew up, in reminiscences:

Before the war I was often asked to buy some bread in the Old Market, because it was very good there. I remember a Turkish bakery in Świętoduska Street, there were various Turkish goods. You could buy special scones there, some honey sticky cakes with nuts, it was really delicious. In the Old Market there were Jewish bakeries where you could buy onion pies and very good bread. [...]

It was so visible in Lublin that one part of the city was a multicultural town. You could meet Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Jews, people of many different confessions; and also schools, there was Jewish academy, a Catholic university [...] you were able to see Jews in skull-caps and gabardines, farmers in their traditional clothes and all this was very noticeable in the street. [...] Jews were recognized because of own clothing - black mainly, but it was common to hear people speaking Ukrainian and Belarusian, maybe not so often. My mother was Orthodox and that is why I used to go sometimes to Orthodox Church. I remember very carefully the Orthodox Church. I felt very deeply the duality of Lublin, that here are Catholicism and Orthodoxy and Judaism...⁹.

Thanks to these memories local people can learn more about the history of their homeland and understand the importance of Lublin's past and its traditions. In this way the young generation can find out more about famous people connected with their town, great families, streets, mansion houses and landmarks. While the above-mentioned exhibition shows the life of the Lublin Jews, "The Primer" - another exhibition installed in the Museum in Majdanek, concerns children busted in the death concentration camp. In one of the barracks the visitor encounters a possibility to hear voices of children who survived:

Piotr Kiriszczenko:

We went into rubbish sites to find at least some rotten piece of bread or potato peels. We were so hungry. There are no words to express it [...] We went into barrack where the Polish people stayed. You would ask for bread, burst into tears, talk about your distress. And then you would get a piece of bread of a matchbox size. How precious it was and tasty¹⁰.

Janina Buczek-Różańska:

⁹ Grodzka Gate Registry; available only original Polish version: http://www.tnn.pl/himow_relacja.php?idhm=79

¹⁰ Archive in Majdanek Muzeum or: Tomasz Pietrasiewicz: *The Primer. Children in Majdanek Camp.* "Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre" Centre. Lublin 2003: p. 7.

We were brought to Majdanek around noon, around 2 or maybe 3 p.m. A big gate in front of us, guard towers. I was still conscious, I was carrying my bundles. My mum was carrying my brother, Maniuś, and my father was carrying some bundles too. They left them on the way, they left the briefcases on the way. It was a big transportation. The first deaths happened. People were sitting in the ditches and dying. The Germans were finishing them off. It was a terrible transportation. It was on 6th or 7th July, 1943. Heat. Huge house. People were fainting there without air. Later the roof was taken off. The stench... And then everyday camp life: roll call, belongings taken away, numbers assigned [...] My father was not there. Our mother was there with us. We saw our father once in the other area, he came up to the wires. Mum saw him first, she showed him to us. She started waving at him, calling him...He didn't recognise us! How terrible we must have looked! He didn't recognise us! Then our mum brought Maniuś up, my brother, and then he did.¹¹

The sound of recorded voices is heard from empty wells - the symbol of definitely different world of the concentration camp, where the children were "sucked in". For the little heroes of the exhibition that world was different from the one they used to experience in pre-war school and classic primers. The well in the middle is mute. It belongs to the hero who did not survive. His name was Henio Żytomirski. He was a little boy, born in a traditional Jewish family in Lublin in 1933, who died in one of the gas chambers in Majdanek in 1942. Someone else must tell his story and this exactly is the key to storytelling in this case- his life is still an inspiration for new projects.

"Letters to Henio" is an initiative which has been organised by the "Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre" Centre for the "Holocaust Memorial Day" since 2005. That action 12 is a kind of untypical and rare storytelling about Holocaust, as it also involves workshops with youth: storytelling based on real history; writing letters to a Jewish boy, who died in the Nazi camp in Lublin; making an exhibition 13 and performance about him.

Storytelling in the Grodzka Gate. Resourceful activities

Recently storytelling has also come closer to educational and artistic events in the "Grodzka Gate- NN Theatre" Center. Storytelling, which revivess movement connected with oral tradition,

¹¹ ibid

¹² The project is linked with the previous projects, dedicated to Lublin's past, "Letters to the Ghetto" and "Letters to the Jewish Orphanage". Just like in these two previous projects, young people from Lublin send letters to Jewish inhabitants and to no longer existing addresses of the former Jewish quarter in Lublin ("Letters to the Ghetto") or to children from former orphanage who died in 1943 in the town ("Letters to the Jewish Orphanage").

¹³ Henio Żytomirski's history was the main inspiration for "The Primer" and its creators (Marta Grudzińska, Tomasz Pietrasiewicz). At first his story had been reconstructed by his cousin, Neta Avidar, an artist and writer, who came form Israel to Poland and donated some documents (photos and letters) on Henio's history to the Centre.

fairytales, epic poetry, legends and myths, is well-known in the world nowadays¹⁴. However, Witold Dąbrowski, NN Theatre actor together with Tomasz Pietrasiewicz were among the first ones to create this type of educative art. Three monodramas were prepared on the basis of type of narrative typical for Chassidic stories (written by Martin Buber) mixed with Isaac Bashevish Singer's tales, and all this using theatrical methods. Owing to this, audience can learn about Jewish habits and traditions, which used to be maintained and cultivated in Lublin until World War II, but have perished along with their keepers. Moreover, Witold Dąbrowski created his latest play "Stories from the Gate" in 2007. The performance is based on oral history: his own testimonies and experiences in the "Grodzka Gate", mixed with pieces of prose and singing. The spectacle is a kind of alternative history of the "magic Gate", its specific symbolism, and also of the people who created this image. This is a rare and very unique performance, where storytelling has been combined with oral history.

Working with a tale/document

The most important reason for working with document is its power of perseverance in keeping the memory alive. The next step in working with a tale in Grodzka Gate is organising theatre or literary workshops. Students write letters to Henio or create performances based on his "One Life's Story". The work process is similar to the theatre of fact (documentary theatre); in practice the historical aspect is an important item, especially because of working with document. Creating art based on document has been very popular recently, but it does not seem to be easy. During "The Art of Dialogue" (Lublin 2007), the sixth theatrical meeting organised by the "Grodzka Gate-NN Theatre" and the "Laboratory of Drama" from Warsaw, a series of workshops for actors, playwrights and directors was prepared in order to research the possibilities of work with documents and its role in Polish dramatic arts. Young artists participated in seminars with experts (writers, psychologists, sociologists), read literature and articles about Holocaust, analysed documents like movies and oral history-rewritten testimonies, but only some of them have found an artistic way to put this topic onto the stage. Not only art, but also education seems to be a problem.

The most important of artistic commemorations, however, were "One Land-Two Temples" and "The Day of Five Prayers" events, both using oral history method. Multiculturalism and multi-religious dialogue were strongly accented during the ecumenical celebration "One Land -Two

¹⁴ It was initiated almost 40 years ago and became especially thriving in the United States of America and France. It gathers artists and common people who want to tell stories and like to perform them during special festivals and workshops. Nevertheless, storytelling is an old technique, known in every country and tradition. Michał Malinowski, a founder of the Storyteller Museum in Konstancin-Jeziorna works for intangible heritage in Polish culture and often invites, also to Lublin, storytellers who have started telling stories about Holocaust and Jewish inheritance (Gail Rosen, Laura Simms or Muriel Bloch). Other Polish storytellers are in "Studnia O."- an association whose ideas and issues are thoroughly discussed in recent issues of "Folklore".

Temples". In cooperation with the archbishop of the Lublin Archbishopric- Józef Życiński, the Centre organised a celebration which took place in the neighbourhood of the Grodzka Gate (Jewish Gate) and two nonexistent great temples: St. Michael Church and Maharszal Synagogue. Holocaust's Survivors and Righteous Among the Nations were the main participants of this ceremony. Standing at night along the corridor of lights they were spreading the word about their experiences during World War II: how they had managed to survive or to rescue someone else's life. NN Theatre organised also a commemoration called "Day of Five Prayers" in the former concentration camp in Majdanek. The huge mass of participants were involved in prayers in various traditions and languages. These two great celebrations showed the great necessity for the intercultural dialogue and the fact that the meaning of word can symbolise Presence and Remembrance.

"One Land-Two Temples". The example of commemoration

Elements of both theatre and documentary resources were used in commemorations which took place on 16th September 2000. In the evening lamps were turned off and two thousands lights were lit by Righteous Among the Nations, Holocaust's Survivors and common citizens, including adolescents, who wished to participate in the event. They formed two parallel 'chains' of people, who stood facing each other. The beginning of each 'chain' started at Tysiaclecia Avenue, the place where Maharszal Synagogue, the biggest synagogue in Lublin, was situated until its destruction, in 1942. The 'chains' continued through the Grodzka Gate, which used to link two different town spaces- the Jewish and the Christian one- to the Old Town, where today only the ruins remain of the most important Catholic temple in the city's past (St. Michael's Parish Church). The soil from the two non-existent shrines (mined by rabbi Michael Schudrich and archbishop Józef Życiński) was mixed by Polish-Jewish Catholic priest, Romuald Weksler - Waszkinel. Then two young students, standing in the half way of corridor formed by the two human chains, in the area of the Godzka Gate, planted two grapevine bushes in the mixed soil. Before it happened, the soil had been passed in the corridor, from one person to another, and the person holding the soil would retell his or her history. The main participants, the Righteous and the Holocaust's Survivors were retelling their individual histories from Holocaust during the whole event.

"The Day of Five Prayers". The example of commemoration

The event took place on 7th November 2000 in the former death camp, now the Majdanek Museum in Lublin. The whole celebration a took a form of a march through the camp. The

representatives of five religions and traditions were praying during the walk.

Main participants were Catholics, Orthodox, Jewish, Protestants and Muslims. After the last prayer a former prisoner handed over special clay plates to the representatives of young people. These plates, made from clay mixed with soil from the place of genocide, had randomly chosen prisoners' camp numbers imprinted onto them. The role of plates was to enable every participant to print their own thumb onto them, including representatives of each religion. It was a symbol of memory about Holocaust and often anonymous victims. At the end all the participants could keep the plates with numbers bearing in mind the memory of the people who had not survived. Former prisoners' testimonies were told during the whole march.

"The Ark of Memory" Project. The example of commemoration

"The Ark of Memory" is the name of the latest initiative of Tomasz Pietrasiewicz. The expanding method of the "Grodzka Gate" Centre- from oral history to storytelling- is developing in a natural way, particularly in the most recent project "The Ark of Memory: Lights in the Darkness-the Righteous Among the Nations" which was launched in September 2007. The aim of the scheme is to preserve and commemorate the testimonies of people who rescued Jews during the World War II. Thanks to artistic and educational methods it is possible to process and transfer these memories to young generations. It is a tragic and absolutely unintelligible thing that most of the Righteous are unwilling to talk about their past and often ask for anonymity, because they are afraid.

Antisemitism, still present in Poland, does not allow the authentic heroes to be gratified for saving human lives. These stories could be a valuable source of knowledge for the society.

Working with elderly people who have experienced traumatic events requires a great deal of sensibility. Therefore NN Theatre arranges many workshops teaching practical skills and offering necessary knowledge. This is the first step. The next phase concerns searching for eyewitnesses and exploring archives, then comes the time for discussions, meetings, recording. The whole of the recorded material is later collected to form a basis for books and exhibitions, which will present the main heroes, but not only the official Righteous, who saved the Jews. During this phase the educational Internet portal is being completed with testimonies, photographs and other documents.

It is also essential to try to find and keep in touch with people (local societies, organizations) who may know of the Righteous. In this way other towns in the Lublin Region, its inhabitants and future generations will have an opportunity to keep the memory about historical events connected with their towns. What is more, the artistic installation should be eye-catching for the youngest generation in order to let them learn how to deal with the past.

Not only people who were given the title of the Righteous Among the Nations are searched for, but also those, whose families managed to rescue lives of Jews during the Holocaust period.

This project can contribute to break stereotypes of Jews, which still preserve, especially in small, provincial towns of Poland. It is a continuation¹⁵ of the idea to convince the Righteous, their families and the public view of their bravery and righteousness. These testimonies can not be silenced. This is a fundamental issue:

What does it mean to apply notions of the private or the secret to victims' recollections of their experiences during Holocaust? This dichotomy rests on a distinction which we take to be self-evident: namely a distinction between our 'role', 'persona' or 'mask' on the one hand and our individual consciousness and inner life on the other. [...] the private and secret can be taken to refer to that which may be disturbing to the listener and which is therefore silenced¹⁶.

Methodology

Before students start writing "Letters to Henio" or visit "The Prime" exhibition, they need to have a certain dose of preparation. They have special seminars and meetings with Righteous Among the Nations. In this way they are able to meet a witness individually. They also encounter a chance to watch the people in the Centre at work with documents (everything is recorded in order to prepare the whole documentation). Besides, visitors can see the exhibition "The Portrait of the Place" depicting not only the destruction and death, but also the life of the pre-war Jewish Lublin.

First of all, thanks to the modern technology pupils can learn history, for instance, by recording people, making a movie or writing a screenplay. They get information from an educational website: "Be a Researcher of Memory"(http://tnn.pl/pm,198,198.html) is a didactic portal for pupils, teachers, students and scholars. This site includes "Storytelling Workshop" (http://tnn.pl/Pracownia_Opowiadania,1659.html) where students can find useful clues about making movies, theatre, commentary or about writing. Thanks to this information a visitor to the website has a variety of choices on what he/she might learn about. They can become storytellers or journalists. They can get to know how to record oral history and how to use it in artistic and educational ways. On the interactive website there is also a studio dedicated to telling stories, where reader/listener can find some examples originating from Lublin and its region: radio, video,

¹⁵ The whole artistic scenery of the permanent exhibition and its documentation will be shown in the Center in August 2008. 'Mini-exhibitions' will be sent into the Lublin Region: to libraries, schools and other institutions which are willing to take care of the particular exhibition and the Righteous' life stories.

¹⁶ N. R. White. Marking absences: Holocaust testimony and history. Oral History Association of Australia Journal. 1999. no. 16: p.12.

literature, theatre.

The language of the whole educational website¹⁷ must be clear. That is why the materials edited by the Centre aim at preserving the speakers' authentic language. A recently published book on the pre-war Lublin is based on testimonies (recorded and rewritten). Here the type of narration is different than in prose. The whole book is more similar to drama where interviewees- the characters- are real witnesses of non-existent epoch. Usually these are writers, artists, printers, photographers who knew pre-war Lublin and its region.

The language in educative activities must be easily understandable, logical and generally reader-friendly. Otherwise information might become incomprehensible. It is obvious that every human being has its individual language code and a personal 'point of view'. "The Great Book of Town" and its history, built with many small histories, have all the potential to stay unique for years as "storytelling is a natural part of the human experience" 18.

To sum up, all given examples have a common main didactic issue: how to deal with memory and accept intercultural heritage. In the scientific field the idea of the "Grodzka Gate" Centre's manager bears a close resemblance to semiotics and Professor Władysław Panas' articles. Panas saw the space of the town as a book with all kinds of signs that people can read. His lectures are the main inspiration to the above-mentioned undertakings. The initiatives are focused on the closest space of the town. Every street or building here has its unique story, even though history of all of them is common. This point of view can be interesting for people who know nothing about the place where they live. It is widely popular in regional education as it clearly relates to local identity.

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¹⁷ www.tnn.lublin.pl

¹⁸ S. N. Hesse-Biber, P. Leavy: The practice of qualitative research. London 2006: p. 149

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