

BRINGING BACK THE SILENCED MEMORIES

(UN)OFFICIAL COMMEMORATIONS OF THE HOLOCAUST IN BELARUS

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abstract

This article addresses the problem of the underrepresentation of the traumatic past in the example of the official commemoration of the Holocaust in Belarus. The silenced memories hinder the process of reconciliation and have real consequences for urban planning and cultural life. Thus, in order to address the tragedy that has been excluded from the official commemoration in Belarus, artists and journalists have created projects to fill the void in remembrance. The article describes how art and media projects have resolved the problem of the underrepresentation of certain events in the official culture and make vernacular memory available to many people.

KEYWORDS: Belarus, collective trauma, haunting, the Holocaust, official commemoration, vernacular memory.

The key topic of the official history of Belarus is probably the Great Patriotic War – a period in the Second World War that lasted from June 22, 1944 to May 9, 1945. The term primarily refers to the conflict between the USSR and Nazi Germany. The Victory is national pride. The war itself and its victims have been well commemorated. However, not all of its chapters have been equally represented in the official memory culture. The Holocaust has been virtually excluded, even though this tragedy deeply affected the country. The Jewish population was a significant actor in urban life and the Holocaust destroyed its cultural connections, affected its identity and destroyed its cultural base. The mass murders of the local Jewry and the displacement of the Jewish legacy became a



collective trauma that has influenced people up to the present day. The primary way of curing the trauma is through articulation. Belarus has continued the Soviet tradition of silencing its difficult past. Even today, the Holocaust is not properly commemorated on an official level. The existing memorials were established under the initiative of the Jewish community and funded by foreign organizations. In Belarus, the official memory culture suppresses any discussions about the genocide and this part of its history is not properly depicted in schoolbooks and museums. There are monuments that commemorate the Holocaust in the public space. However, the narratives that would otherwise give meaning to them are silences. Thus, the realms of memory become (non) sites of memory. Even if a memorial might be present it cannot be fully understood by an uninformed citizen.

Following Avery Gordon, this article approaches the problem of underrepresentation of the traumatic past as being a problem of haunting. The insufficient level of information on the Holocaust in the school curriculum and the official media has transformed vast urban areas into non-sites of memory,¹ even though there might be a monument to the victims. In such situations, memorials do not serve as realms of memory. Local initiatives have attempted to improve the situation by creating digital projects that are capable of filling this void in the awareness of the traumatic past. This paper explores the ways of giving voices to the dead and excluded in order to help people reconcile with the past by bringing back the unheard stories and restoring the layer of remembrance. The main examples in this article are the “Jewish Minsk Audio Guide” and the “Brest Stories Guide”. The projects merge oral history and performative practices in order to spread the stories of the Jewish communities in two Belarusian cities – Minsk and Brest. These two cities were chosen as examples for this study because local digital projects are currently being conducted that contribute to memory culture. The focus of this paper is on exploring the potential of these kinds of projects to bring back the silenced past. Digital tools allow vernacular memory to be transformed into a heritage that creates an additional layer to the official narratives of the past. As technology has become more affordable, art and media projects are able to resolve the problem of underrepresentation of certain events in the official memory culture and make vernacular memory available to many people.

On the importance of reconciliation with the traumatic past

Traumatic experiences can be passed down from one generation to the next. The trauma is inherited not as an actual recollection but rather as an “imaginative investment and projection”.² People who have never experienced the catastrophe themselves remember it through narratives, stories and images – “these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right ... These

events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present”.³ It can be traced on an individual level among the offspring of the Holocaust survivors who struggle to reform their identities and establish lost connections with their late family members and homelands. Nazi crimes have not just damaged the lives of their victims; they have ruined the social fabric that existed in the urban settlements of today’s Belarus. Individual trauma damages the psyche when defense mechanisms fail when they are faced by a manifestation of brutal force. Collective trauma is about the damaged tissues of social life. It undermines the ties between people and weakens the general sense of belonging to a community. The collective trauma leads to a “gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared”.⁴ It continues to influence not only the direct offspring of the survivors but entire communities that inhabit the territory in which the terror took place.

It is not only people who are carriers of memories. The environment also retains the dreadful recollections. Unmarked mass graves and places of execution are the *non-sites of memory*.⁵ Polish scholar Roma Sendyka coined the term in opposition to *sites of memory* or *lieux de mémoire*.⁶ These unmarked sites, as Sendyka argues, do not serve as ‘a memory anchor’ and could be

called *non-sites of memory*. Although these realms are not revealed on the material level of culture, non-sites of memory still communicate the secrets they keep. When there are no ruins or monuments, or any other evidence of past traumatic events, it is almost impossible to explain what is odd about these places. However, certain people may feel the strangeness of the place.

Although it is not possible to read directly, the past can manifest itself, particularly if we are talking about mass burials. Sendyka argues that this could have an interesting non-anthropocentric explanation. Decomposition saturates “the environment with ions, bacteria, and chemical compounds, which enter into the water and the air”. It may even influence the organisms that inhabit the area, chemically change the plants, influence “the psychic state of people and animals. Thus, at the cellular level, in a way that has not yet been fully understood, the terrain of non-sites of memory is occupied by extra-cognitive processes and somatic connections”.⁷ This explains why we may sometimes feel that a place is peculiar even if we are unaware of its background. But I believe there is more to it, and that urban planning, the appearance of facades and unexplainable gaps between houses also communicate that the urban scenery is covering a tragic secret. These places are haunted.

In her book *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon suggests that in order to achieve a complete understanding of social life, sociologists must explore the uncanny presence of something that appears not to be present. Recognizing haunting leads to understanding what has happened and how it continues to affect people. In order to understand the horrors of the Nazi terror and its aftermath we need to pay attention to the ghosts living



Jews in the Minsk ghetto, 1941. The ghetto was created in 1941, soon after the German invasion. It housed close to 100,000 people, and was the largest in the German-occupied part of the Soviet Union. The house on the right is the Historic workshop.



with us. “The ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life”.⁸ The silenced events manifest themselves and draw us “affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition”.⁹

It is challenging to transform traumatic events into a coherent narrative. Some of these events are unspeakable while others do not support the official discourse of the past. The history is articulated via the lives of elite politicians and officials while the recollections of other groups are neglected as being ‘unworthy’. The Jewish history and genocide do not fit the official Belarusian narrative that is centered around the sacrifice of the Belarusian folk and the victory in the Great Patriotic War. Thus, the losses of the Jewish people have been excluded as they are not considered valuable enough to be remembered. They have not been completely forgotten – they are lost between memory and representation.¹⁰

The problem with memory studies is that personal recollections are influenced by the discourse in which a person lives. Memories excluded from official narratives are harder to frame and remember on the individual level. Not compulsory, those memories should be traumatic (although in the described case they are), they can be ignored because they do not fit the official narrative or carriers of these recollections are neglected by historiography.¹¹ Official narratives of the past tend to focus on grand events, ignoring vernacular memory. Vernacular memory is a form of public memory that is based on the recollections of witnesses, rather than historians or political leaders. Vernacular memory is a non-institutionalized form of remembrance that includes creating vernacular shrines and narrations. As there are many vernacular cultures, numerous carriers of different vernacular versions of the past restate their views that were handed down from “firsthand experience in small-scale communities

rather than the ‘imagined’ communities of a large nation”.¹² While studying vernacular memory one has to take into consideration the complexity and ambiguity of the past, as there are collisions between the recollections of different social groups.

Unspoken traumatic events disturb people. Silencing the recollections hinders reconciliation with the past. Abraham and Torok write: “what returns to haunt, on the nature of the thing ‘phantomized’ during the preceding generation, phantomized because it was unspeakable in words because it had to be wrapped in silence.”¹³ Expressing these silenced memories orally and artistically is a primary way of dealing with trauma on a personal and a collective level. Communicating painful stories is more beneficial than silencing them, as it helps the next generations to reconcile with the past. As the Jewish legacy of Belarusian towns is still remembered – although scarcely – by the locals, there is a need to commemorate it and to transform it into heritage. Heritage is created via collective processes that happen in the realms of culture and social life. Assigning a value to objects, practices and places and transforming them into heritage is called *heritagization*.¹⁴ Remembering is an active creation, rather than a mere passive inheritance. Due to the selective nature of memory, people assemble comprehensible stories from the fragments of the past.¹⁵ The past is brought and made alive into the present “through historical contingency and strategic appropriations, deployments, redeployments, and creation of connections and reconnection”.¹⁶ The commemoration is a consequence of today’s demands.¹⁷ And this demand is to make the unheard stories available to the public. Luckily, new media and digital tools provide an opportunity to make the silenced narratives heard by sharing vernacular recollections.

The Holocaust and its silencing

Belarus suffered terrible losses during the Second World War and the number of victims of the Holocaust was also higher in Belarus than in any other European country. However, the exact number of victims is still unknown. It varies from 600,000 to 800,000, or up to 82% of the Jewish population.¹⁸ The Holo-



The memorial *Jama* [The Pit] is hard to notice from the road because of the location in the landscape.



The Museum of the Great Patriotic War is a new memorial complex in Minsk, focused on the victory over Nazism.



caust primarily affected urban settlements, as a big share of the population was Jewish. This article is based on the history and commemoration practices in Minsk and Brest. Both cities had a significant share of the Jewish population. Almost one third of Minsk's population was Jewish.¹⁹ In Brest, the figure was even higher. In 1940, around 40% of its inhabitants were Jewish.²⁰ Their engagement in commerce and economic life was prevalent. The Jewish community was not merely a minority, but rather one of the urban life basis. In both cities, ghettos were created. In the Minsk ghetto, 100,000 Jews were confined. Also, in December, around 7,000 Jews were transported from Western Europe to a separate ghetto in Minsk. The Nazis liquidated both ghettos in 1943.²¹ In autumn 1942, around 20,000 people from Brest and the area were extradited to Bronnaya Gora and executed.²² However, there were also other mass shootings inside the Brest ghetto, in which 4,000 people were murdered.

Although the Great Patriotic War is a core of official memory culture in the Soviet public sphere, some categories of victims, including Jewish people, were neglected.²³ The Holocaust was not denied – it was just not mentioned. The genocide was not considered to be a separate phenomenon but just another example of Nazi crimes against civilians.²⁴ There are diverse reasons for silencing the past. The desire to maintain the myth that Slavs and communists were the primary targets of the Nazis is one of them. Also, admitting to the genocide could lead to the rise of a Jewish national identity.²⁵ In either event, Soviet propaganda has certainly avoided Judaizing the victory narrative.

Lukashenko made the most of the Great Patriotic War narrative in order to legitimize his regime and unambiguously placed the “Great Patriotic War” at the center of state ideology. Lukashenko described the war as “a significant point in our history”, in which “the majestic spirit of the Belarusian people, its freedom-loving essence and historical wisdom were most clearly

manifested”. Consistently emphasizing the enormous contribution of Belarusians to the victory over Nazism – in this context, the three million victims of the republic's population are readily mentioned.²⁶ Also, talking about the Holocaust might open a discussion on the collaboration of Belarusians with the Nazis.²⁷

After 1991, the Holocaust has no longer been silenced. It was eventually memorialized in the public space of Belarusian towns. The sites of memory that currently exist were created with the help of foreign foundations and private initiatives, not by the Belarusian state.²⁸ There are Holocaust memorial complexes near Minsk in Trascianec and Blagauschyna, in Bronnaya Gora in the Brest region and a monument to the victims at the cemetery in Brest. However, the focus of this paper is on commemoration in urban areas. Thus, these examples have been excluded from discussions as it is not possible to run across them unintentionally.

Memorials in Minsk and their meaning

THE PIT

This memorial started its existence as a post-war vernacular memorial in 1947. At the time, it was a black obelisk erected to commemorate a pogrom that had occurred on March 2, 1942 when Nazis and Nazi collaborators assassinated several few thousand Jews. Although the form of the commemoration is reminiscent of an official form of commemoration, the obelisk was funded by private donations from members of the Jewish community. It was erected with the support of those Jews who worked for the municipal authorities of Minsk.²⁹ The monument contains texts in Russian and Yiddish ‘In the bright memory of five thousand Jews who perished at the hands of the fierce enemies of humanity – German-Fascist villains’. It is the only monument in Belarus that existed for several decades in Soviet times as other vernacular memorials were demolished.³⁰ This place became a site of

memory for the local Jewish community and a place for gatherings. It was a meeting point for March 2, Victory Day, as well as festive days. The locals dubbed the place *Jama*, which translates from Russian as *the Pit*, due to its characteristic landscape.

In 1992, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, renowned architect Leonid Levin proposed a reorganization of the monument. Levin is a crucial figure in Holocaust memorialization in Belarus as he was both respected by the Jewish community and honored by the government. This allowed him to promote the Jewish agenda and receive the agreement for the creation of the memorials, as well as to spread his ideas throughout the community.³¹ Levin initiated the transformation of a lone obelisk into a memorial complex. After almost a decade of discussions and preparations in 2000, the monument was accompanied by a sculptural group that represented *Walking to Death* as bedraggled figures descending to the bottom of *The Pit*. Another element of the memorial complex is a granite menorah listing all the sponsors – local and foreign, private and state-owned institutions. Close by is the *Alley of the Righteous* – a range of trees with name plaques. The memorial is placed just a few meters away from a nine-story apartment building and, because of the landscape, it is hard to notice the memorial from the road. The locations of these monuments are historically accurate. They are almost hidden from passers-by, which decreases their accessibility to the general public. They do not communicate with random people about the traumatic past. However, the semi-visibility of this monument guaranteed its existence throughout the Soviet era and then in Lukashenko's Belarus, as the authorities would not permit greater exposure.

THE BROKEN HEARTH

The *Broken Hearth* is a monument to the victims of the Minsk ghetto. Leonid Levin created this memorial group on the site of a former Jewish cemetery within the ghetto's borders. The memorial, created in 2008 by architect Leonid Levin and sculptor Maxim Petrul, symbolizes a destroyed house. On a square plinth of red granite – the symbolic foundations of the house – is a broken bronze round table and a Viennese chair – representing a place at which a Jewish family used to gather. Another monument in this area is *The Pantheon of Memory* – a semi-circle comprising nine stones that commemorate the Jews who were deported to Minsk from Dusseldorf, Bremen, Cologne, Bonn, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, Austria, Königsberg and Brno. The first stone was established in 1998 and the most recent stone in 2015.³² This monument was funded by the above-mentioned cities, as well as Minsk municipality, the German and Israeli embassies, international organizations and the Union of Belarusian Jewish Public Associations and Communities.

This site is a former Jewish graveyard that had been demol-

ished together with the ghetto. Between these two objects is a lapidarium formed from the old Jewish tombstones that had risen from the ground during heavy rainfall. Several of these tombstones were unearthed during pipeline construction. Even though a memorial has been created, this location has not yet become a site of memory, as people rarely interact with the monuments. The monuments are located in a park quite remote from public transport routes. Only a few people are aware of the location and these people are mainly local residents. The park, which was created in the Soviet era, remains a place for walking the dog and meeting other people (sometimes the latter involves the consumption of alcohol). The Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences uses former ghetto land as a sports ground for jogging and physical activities. The ritualized activities close to the monuments only occur when an official delegation (usually from abroad) visits the site or when a guided tour about Jewish history is conducted. The monuments themselves influence people by making them keep the distance in order not to be disrespectful.

Memory institutions in Minsk

THE MUSEUM OF THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

The Museum of the Great Patriotic War is a large new memorial complex that serves the state's ideology. Its exposition communicates the idea of the atrocities of the Nazi occupation and genocide against Soviet Belarusians and does not specifically focus on Jewish people. Continuing the Soviet tradition, the term *Holocaust* is not mentioned. The Jewish victims are only referred to once on an explanatory plaque. Belarusian museumizing practices have continued the Soviet approach that blended the Holocaust with the narrative of the suffering of the Belarusian people.³³

THE MUSEUM OF JEWISH HISTORY

This underrepresentation could be balanced by private museums but the existing cannot compete with state memorialization. There is a Museum of Jewish History and Culture in Minsk. It is a small institution that was opened by Belarusian Jewish community activists with support from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.³⁴ Its exposition includes information about Jewish history printed on walls and everyday items and photographs that were donated to the museum by Jewish families or by non-Jewish neighbors of those who vanished during the Holocaust. The problem is that this museum cannot

be considered to be truly open to the general public. The only way of reaching the museum is to find out about it online or from other people, make an appointment via phone and access the museum through a guarded post. The museum has no facade so it cannot be identified at close quarters. It is hidden behind an unmarked fence along with various Jewish organizations. Thus, it does not significantly impact the city's memory landscape.

“EVEN THOUGH A MEMORIAL HAS BEEN CREATED, THIS LOCATION HAS NOT YET BECOME A SITE OF MEMORY, AS PEOPLE RARELY INTERACT WITH THE MONUMENTS.”

THE HISTORICAL WORKSHOP

Another important location for Holocaust studies and the Jewish community is the Historical Workshop. It is a research center located in a house that used to form part of the Minsk ghetto. The Historical Workshop studies previously unknown topics about the history of the Second World War, particularly events about the Minsk ghetto and the Trostenets extermination camp that have not been studied much in Germany and Belarus. The Historical Workshop publishes the results of its research and the personal memoirs of witnesses and scientific collections. It also collects archival materials and organizes seminars, conferences and science clubs. In addition, it works with the second and third-generations families of war victims, visits to memory forums in the regions are organized, and psychological support is provided to target groups.³⁵ There is no doubt about the impact that this organization has had on Jewish studies in Belarus. However, it is a research and education center, not a public site. Thus, it has been designed to support educators, professionals and members of the Jewish community.

Memorialization of the Holocaust in Brest A MONUMENT IN BREST

Brest's public space contains only one monument to the victims of the Holocaust. In 1946, the people of Brest erected a monument with an inscription in Yiddish to commemorate the deaths of thousands of locals.³⁶ The post-war vernacular monument was demolished in 1974. It was restored in 1992 with the help of endowments from Jewish organizations from Israel, Argentina and the USA.³⁷ A small monument resembling a tombstone states the following in Belarusian, Hebrew, and Yiddish "In memory of 34,000 Jews, prisoners of the ghetto in Brest and its suburbs – the innocent victims of Nazism in the years of the Great Patriotic War, 1941–1942". The appearance and maintenance of this monument is a community business as input from the municipality is limited to a silent agreement that it is allowed to be sited in a public space.

The monument is in a central area but there are not so many passersby. One can understand it is a commemoration park but its dedication is not clear unless one closely approaches the monument. It serves as a site of memory on commemoration days. It is a meeting place and a place of rituals. However, the monument is usually ignored and people pass by without any interaction. The path is quite remote and there are no benches close by, making the monument virtually invisible. Due to its moderate design, it does not evoke any emotions and images. Thus, it provides only brief information about the tragedy all those years ago and does not serve as a site of memory for Brest's citizens, apart from the active members of the Jewish community.

“THE MAIN PROBLEM OF MEMORY CULTURE IS THE LOW LEVEL OF AWARENESS OF THE HOLOCAUST BECAUSE IT IS BARELY MENTIONED IN SCHOOLBOOKS.”

THE HOLOCAUST IN BREST'S MUSEUMS

On an official level, the Holocaust is present in the Museum of the Brest Fortress. A stand dedicated to the victims of the Brest ghetto does not include the words “Jews”, “Holocaust” or “Antisemitism”. The vitrine includes photos of Jewish people and families, ashes from Auschwitz and prisoners' clothing from Majdanek.³⁸ The narrative created in the museum is quite confusing. However, it is a big step for the official memory culture to approach to commemoration of the Holocaust. It is possible to observe a shift in the memory canon of the Soviet tradition in the state museum.³⁹ Thus, the state has only dedicated one uninformative stand in a vast museum complex.

An example of vernacular commemoration is the museum called the Jews of Brest. Most of the items that became exhibits in the museum were donated by Brest residents, as well as people from Brest and their relatives living in the USA, Argentina and Israel. It was opened in 2011 and still remains the first and only Jewish museum outside of Minsk.

The museum is dedicated to the history of the city's Jewish community since the 1920s and contains over 120 exhibits including Jewish subjects (Jewish household items, rare prayer books, textbooks, fragments of an old Torah scroll), as well as archival documents, photographs and books. A separate section is dedicated to famous natives of Brest.

The museum's exposition fits into one medium-sized room. Its walls are painted in three colors corresponding to the museum's various exhibits that are dedicated to the different phases of the Jewish history of the city. A pink wall symbolizes the pre-war life of the Jews of Brest. A gray wall with barbed wire represents the memory of the Holocaust. Light green represents the color of the revival of the Jewish community of Brest and the present exhibits at the stand called “People, Events, Life”. The museum is located in the basement of a five-storey Soviet apartment building and it is necessary to know the location of the museum in order to find it – it is totally unnoticeable to passersby. However, it is an important shrine-like location for community members and people who are specifically interested in the subject. Unfortunately, the museum is poorly presented online. It has no website or social media account that could compensate for its invisibility in the public space.

Intangible memorialization: education and bottom-up digital projects

The main problem of memory culture is the low level of awareness of the Holocaust because it is barely mentioned in schoolbooks. The Great Patriotic War is a core topic for the history curriculum, as well as the basis of Belarusian ideology. High school students attend 19 classes dedicated to the Second World War and the Great Patriotic War. There are also extracurricular activities, dozens of events, scientific and practical conferences,



Employees of a Jewish owned factory in Brest (pre-war photograph). In 1940, around 40 percent of Brest's inhabitants were Jewish. Their engagement in commerce and economic life was prevalent. The Jewish community was not merely a minority, but rather one of the urban life basis.

research, as well as creative competitions dedicated to the Great Patriotic War. Only a very small part of the school curriculum includes the history of the Holocaust and the Jewish population. This topic is condensed into three brief paragraphs. Even the word *Holocaust* does not appear in schoolbooks. The authors only use the words *ghetto* and *genocide*. For Belarus, a country that suffered immensely from the Holocaust, describing and reflecting on the complexity and depth of the tragedy of our compatriots in only three paragraphs is, of course, objectively insufficient.

Some teachers choose to talk more openly about the Holocaust with their students and seek the support of the Museum of Jewish History and the Historic Workshop. Adults sometimes also develop an interest as they feel something is missing from their vision of their country's history. Bottom-up initiatives aim to eliminate this underrepresentation by creating digital projects that make history more easily accessible. The following paragraphs describe the current projects in Minsk and Brest.

Oral history archive and independent mass media

Nasha Pamiac.org [Our Memory] is an oral history database comprising a Belarusian Oral History Archive containing video recordings of people sharing their recollections of 20th-century events. One of its sections is dedicated to the Minsk ghetto. This project aims to preserve the narratives and promote their use for research and educational purposes. The project is not sufficiently interesting to attract the general public as it primarily targets researchers. However, it is a step away from dry fact to the human side of the Holocaust. The Belarusian Oral History Archive preserves the voices of witnesses. However, the task of sharing these voices and making them easily accessible to a broader audience is the responsibility of the mass media, as the education system maintains ignorance. In the past years, the examina-



The memorial monument in Brest reads: "In memory of 34,000 Jews, prisoners of the ghetto in Brest and its suburbs – the innocent victims of Nazism in the years of the Great Patriotic War, 1941–1942".

tion of the Jewish legacy has become a trendy topic for the new media. Independent online media such as Citydog and 34travel systemically inform their readers about the Jewish history of the country. Their articles contain information about sites and non-sites of memory and how the Soviets transformed former Jewish buildings. They share people's recollections of life in the ghetto and post-war memories. As these articles are published regularly and are aimed at a broad audience, these media publications diminish the void created by the silencing of the Holocaust in the official discourse. Up to autumn 2020, the digital expansion was limited to Nasha Pamiac and periodical online publications.

Jewish Minsk audio guide

In October 2020, the first Belarusian-Jewish Festival was held by the Belarusian-Jewish Cultural Heritage Center. This private non-commercial organization was established as recently as 2019. The idea behind the festival was to present the Jewish history and heritage in Belarus, which would not only focus on the Jewish community but on Belarusian society as a whole. The festival was supposed to open the way to the roots, to the search for national identity. The organization also emphasizes its incredible legacy – a product of the neighborhood of the Jewish and Belarusian people. The organizers stated that “the Belarusian-Jewish Festival demonstrates that the hidden and forgotten history is not only about the past, but to a much greater extent about our present day”.⁴⁰ The release of the first route invites people to walk along one of the oldest streets in Minsk, plunge into the busy shopping area from the late 19th century, feel the multiculturalism of the city and understand the role that Jews played in its life. The Jewish history of Minsk is not a separate history of the Jewish community; it is an integral part of the heritage of modern Belarus, the history of the development and formation of the city. It will allow people to better understand the national code of modern Belarusians.⁴¹

The tour focuses on the upper town – the old city center. This is an interesting starting point because the conventional tours focus on the former ghetto territory. Inviting people to explore the old town through the lens of Jewish culture helps to integrate Jews into the pre-war historical narrative. However, this tour is the first in the series and the next editions will cover other aspects of Jewish history. The audio guide is informative enough voids of information missing from the textbooks and museums and entertaining enough to attract the listeners.

Brest stories guide

An independent Brest-based theatre called Kryly Khalopa developed a project called “Brest Stories Guide” comprising a collection of documentary audio performances that intended to be listened to while walking around the city. The motivation for creating this project came from the fact that an important layer of history was underrepresented in museums, public spaces, tourist guides and the school history curriculum. Brest Stories Guide is a mobile app that allows the city to be navigated using a digital city map while listening to an audio commentary. Key places of Jewish heritage and historical events are marked on the map. The urban space is a stage upon which voices from the past become audible to today’s inhabitants and tourists. It represents a plunge into the past that allows us to see and understand a part of history that has been erased from the city’s landscape and avoided in the official commemoration. “Brest Stories Guide” is a project that combines art, journalism and cultural heritage preservation. The authors describe the project as “both an innovative tourist and art product, and a reliable source for studying the city history.”⁴²

The main focus of the project is antisemitism and the elimination of the Jewish community in Brest from 1941–1942. Their mission is to help people understand that the Holocaust is a problem of Jews from the past:

Today we can state that the biggest catastrophe and trauma of city life is not present in its memory. With the Brest Stories Guide project, our theatre is conveying the idea that the Holocaust concerns not only Jews and the past but also the problem of people excluding in the modern world. Those who remain indifferent to these events will remain indifferent to the new crimes that allegedly only concern only others.⁴³

The project is an attempt to recreate history using vernacular sources, books, photos and interviews with eyewitnesses and survivors, as well as Nazi officers’ reports. It relies more on the voices of the inhabitants than on the official version of history presented in textbooks.

On the importance of giving a voice to the past

The sites of memory of the Holocaust exist in a regime of semi-visibility. Memorialization is ‘hidden in its exposure’ because there are no signs that could indicate that they are nearby and give a hint to someone who is not intentionally looking for them. The locations of the official commemorations are out of sight of traffic, flaneurs and tourists. Moreover, the monument is a mere stone that requires informational support in order to be read and understood. The legacy of the Jewish community in Belarus and the commemoration of the Holocaust are underrepresented in the urban spaces of Minsk and Brest. This issue continues in the domain of education. The history of the Holocaust is underrepresented in the public space of Belarusian towns, in contrast to the extensive memorialization of the Great Patriotic War.

Because of historical peculiarities, revelations are only obvious to those people who are interested in the topic and are ready to search for the sites of memory and the information behind them. Minsk and Brest contain vast areas that are places of burials and non-sites of memory. As the commemorations are fragmental and lack additional information, people might feel a sense of strangeness and alienation, as major parts of the history are missing. According to Gordon, the cities are haunted. Thus, an elaboration of the past might help people make peace with the tormented history. Facing and admitting to the ghosts that live with us is crucial, as ignorance of ghostly matters may have some real outcomes.

In January 2019, builders uncovered one of the mass graves after a private developer had paid for the right to build an elite residential area in the very center of Brest. 1,214 human remains were unearthed. I have previously mentioned the mass murders that took place in the ghetto in 1942. Local residents were aware of the grave existence. Some people described the location as execution yards (*rasstrelnye dvory*) in their colloquial communication. Also, official information existed about the mass burials at this site, although the authorities subsequently denied it.⁴⁴ This is a remarkable example of a non-site of memory. The lack of commemoration resulted in an unpleasant outcome that became a re-traumatizing experience for the community and led to financial losses for the business. The scandal in Brest has demonstrated how important it is to consider the past while engaging in urban planning for the future. It is also a wonderful illustration of how silenced memory functions: being buried under the surface it only slightly alters the way of life, although paralyzing it to a certain extent. However, the memory is eventually unearthed and it becomes impossible to ignore it. This demonstrates that nothing can be covered and truly forgotten. We need to address the difficult past. It is not only the executions and horrors of war that have been silenced.

This underrepresentation entails the existence of non-sites of memory. The insufficiency of official commemoration resulted in the creation of an intangible system of memorialization that existed as oral history and has now taken a digital form. These narratives – retold by the locals and digitized – fill the voids of memory and understanding of Jewish history, creating another level of meaning. This additional layer serves as a navigational system that links sites of memories – and ‘non-sites of memory’ – to each other and with their cultural meaning. It creates a possibility for existing of the agonistic public sphere in which different meanings can exist without creating conflict, enrich the sphere and decrease the dominance of the official discourse.

The regime of semi-visibility created a challenge for those people who decided to talk about the Jewish history of Minsk. Through their work, journalists, public historians and tour guides are reproducing the narrative of the history of the Jewish community. The work they are doing to fill the voids of material commemorations is like creating an additional layer of remembrance. It serves as an intangible navigation system of meanings that bond memorials between each other and fill the voids in the understanding of past events. It had previously existed in vernacular forms but has now become more visible and usable, thanks to digital technology, and has gained popularity among the non-Jewish population.

Digital tools allow us to present the silenced stories, link them to urban locations and even deanonymize the victims. There is no need to build a coherent storyline, like in schoolbooks or the movies. Different versions can be recorded and presented simultaneously. Digitized data allows us to preserve recollections that have been untouched for a longer time and present and store an unlimited amount of narratives and versions of past events. Projects such as the “Brest Stories Guide” highlight a wider array of recollections and commemorate the experiences of neglected social groups. This is in line with the new turn in the humanities that intends to be more inclusive. The revival of past events is compulsory for overcoming the trauma. Such a process only becomes possible when someone interacts with the entries. The “Brest Stories Guide” makes this interaction possible for a broader audience and is also far more entertaining than a traditional archive. This accessibility and appeal to a broader public raises the likelihood of silenced traumas being heard, remembered and treated.

Silencing the memory of the Jewish population became the *modus operandi* of the local authorities. This part of history had been transmitted as oral narrations by the locals so the memory of the dreadful events survived. It is something that the locals are aware of, although a stranger would not be able to learn about the events from the urban space itself. The vernacular recollections and archive entries continued until the time when they were given an opportunity to be heard, thanks to the activists, artists and journalists who are providing this input. These artistic and media interventions are a step towards reconciling with the past and soothing its ghosts. Perhaps when the damage is so severe that there is little that can be restored, digital commemorations are a way of transforming the non-sites of memory into

lieux de mémoire. Introducing a creative approach to memory studies provides the opportunity to relive the dreadful events and be liberated from them. Liberation from the ghosts that haunt urban spaces allows people to accept the damage that has been done to the community and restore the wrecked identity. This is vital for overcoming collective trauma and restoring communal bonds. Without making peace with the past it is impossible to move further.

Holocaust commemoration in post-Lukashenko’s Belarus

This article discussed the memorialization of the Holocaust in post-Soviet Belarus under Lukashenko’s regime. However, the ongoing protests make one think about how the country would change after the regime falls. Of course, there would be a complete reevaluation of the historical narratives – both in the public space and in education. Depending on the orientation of the next government, the history books would be rewritten to serve a far-right nationalist agenda, pro-European discourse, or even suggest another version of Belarusian-Russian unity.

Currently, Belarusians are facing mass political repression, torture, protesters been murdered by the police, as well as silencing on an official level. Some people in Belarus use the term *genocide* to describe the persecution of Belarusians who do not support Lukashenko – and the riot police are being compared to the Nazis during World War II. Although the term is not accurate for this case, these associations may provoke a wave of reassessment of the memory of the Holocaust regarding recent traumatic events.

The vernacular memorials that were created to mourn murdered people are being violently destroyed; people are being detained for attempting to maintain spontaneous memorials. This traumatic experience might trigger the development of a more sensitive political environment and an unapologetic approach to silencing the tragedies. Thus, the representation of the Holocaust in the official memory culture might receive a broader commemoration on an official level after a change in the political course. Thus, the dark events of 2020 may lead to the creation of a more diverse memory culture in the country that would pay more attention to the danger of authoritarian ideologies. ✖

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