

The Story of the Kowalski Family *and* Quarter L. *Memory Messages on the Screen*

Arkadiusz Gołębiewski can be called a director of memory – of collective rather than individual memory. He can also be called a director with the mission of creating this memory. It should be added that as a director he works independently – usually using his own production company – and on a small budget, sometimes with very little support from public institutions. This formula implies that his work is about a meeting with a specific approach to the matter of history – history that is unwanted, uncomfortable, or at least null and indifferent to the identity message formulated by the mainstream and supported by the state.

I would like to devote special attention to two such films – *The Story of the Kowalski Family* (*Historia Kowalskich*, 2009) and *Quarter L* (*Kwatera Ł*, 2013) – which concern spheres of the past that have caused anxiety and introduced alien elements to the officially perpetuated message, greatly expanding, correcting or even countering this message. In the first case, the source of anxiety is not so much the matter of the past itself as the way it is treated. The Holocaust is, after all, an obvious subject when it comes to such questions. The movie by Gołębiewski (developed together with Maciej Pawlicki) presents it against the social pedagogy that has been rising since 1989, and especially since 2000. Among its most important manifestations are the lively and mostly approving discussion of the theses in books by Jan Tomasz Gross, the film *The Aftermath* (*Pokłosie*, 2012) by Władysław Pasikowski, or the broadcast of the German public television series *Our Mothers, Our Fathers* (*Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter*, 2013). Its essential meaning is “discovering” the active anti-Semitism of Poles collaborating with Germans in the extermination of Jews, and of their even inspiring it, and continuing it after the Nazi occupation. The word “discovering” was put in quotation marks because, on the one hand, it involves a process of introducing a significant, but previously poorly accented element into the collective memory; on the other hand, it is an activity that is often based on clear abuses of historical knowledge. The people and institutions responsible for creating this memory pedagogy have chosen from among the ways to transform history into memory cited by Barbara Szacka.[1] These ways include, above all, exaggeration, omission

[1] B. Szacka, *Czas przeszły, pamięć, mit*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2006, pp. 29–30.

and context construction, and, additionally, extreme interpretation of doubtful or unexplained situations. This pedagogy sometimes takes shapes that cannot be called abuse (e.g. *Ida* by Paweł Pawlikowski, 2013), which, somewhat paradoxically, strengthens its impact.

While filming the story of several families (particularly the Kowalski family) from Stary Ciepeliów and Rekówka, Gołębiowski and Pawlicki make a sharp reevaluation. Regardless of their intent, setting the movie in the Polish provinces east of Warsaw, and showing a burning house with a large group of people locked inside situates the film in a close relationship with the symbolism of *Jedwabne*, expressed in other films dealing with this subject.[2] This relationship is by no means parallel. Poles move from the category of offenders to the category of co-victims. With this symbolism, a well-documented microhistory of burning thirty-four people – Jews and the families hiding them, is transferred into space which is much broader. This occurs also because the representation of the tragedy in *Jedwabne* has been made *pars pro toto*. A low-cost production, co-financed by public television and very sparingly distributed was a response to an attempt to reverse Polish memory, though nothing indicates that it was supposed to be a continuation of the taboo-creating strategy native to the Communist era.

The other case, *Quarter L (Kwatera Ł)*, tells another story,[3] the tragedy of victims of Stalin's terror that took place a few years later, especially that of the underground resistance soldiers who did not put down their weapons after the end of World War II and led the fight against the new Soviet occupiers. This fate was suffered not only to them, however, but also generally by people of merit in pre-war Poland, including the commanders of the underground Home Army who fought against Germans, high representatives of the Polish underground state from the time of the Nazi occupation, but also people who were not involved in the war, or who even had served the powers of the new order. For the great majority of them, this tragedy was manifested in brutal investigations conducted by the secret police, and the official court judgments that resulted, and, for many, the death penalty and anonymous burial in unmarked pits.

The term "bandits" assigned to these people by the communist propaganda in the 1940s gradually lost its affective power. A strategy introduced in later decades was the total elimination of memory. This strategy was essentially upheld even after 1989. The subject of the "accursed soldiers" – such an emotionally charged term was adopted not long ago by the supporters of introducing these victims of communism into the collective memory – was a carefully guarded taboo. The mythologization of the round-table agreement between a part of the opposition and the Communists forced both more radical practices

[2] For film symbolism connected with *Jedwabne* see: K. Mąka-Malatyńska, *Widok z tej strony. Przedstawienia Holocaustu w polskim filmie*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2012, pp. 256–257.

[3] Although they might be connected as e.g. recently in *Ida* by Pawlikowski through the character of a former Stalinist prosecutor of Jewish origin.

against totalitarianism and the most drastic trespasses of the people from the former system to be discarded.

It was not until the political changes in 2005 that putting these issues into a general circulation was made possible. For a short time, intensive, and later very limited, state support helped to produce an explosion of memory – an explosion of a relatively small range, but of considerable firepower – also among the youth.[4] It was manifested by books, movies, music activities (mainly in popular music), the rise of reconstruction groups, commemorating activities etc., which systematically affected the collective memory of the whole society.

While shooting *Quarter L (Kwatera Ł)*, Gołębiewski found himself at the centre of these events. He showed[5] a crucial and symbolically extremely fertile situation – the exhumation of the remains of those murdered in the so-called *Łączka* – a small place in Warsaw Powązki cemetery where terror victims were buried in secret, and after a layer of soil was placed on them, one part of it was turned into a cemetery dump, while in another part, the officers of the communist power apparatus were buried. The bodies of the greatest and most famous representatives of the pre-war elite were buried in *Łączka*, those whose fate lay directly in the hands of the most influential officers of the secret police. Crowded bones in shallow pits; young archaeologists and anthropologists wearing rubber gloves and masks on their faces, collecting genetic material from families necessary to identify the remains; straight rows of small, plain coffins – all these images drill into viewers very meaningful memory material – the more documentary it is, the better it builds symbolic meanings.

Like *The Story of the Kowalski Family (Historia Kowalskich)*, *Quarter L (Kwatera Ł)*, is an expression of the mission mentioned at the very beginning, which has been taken up by the director. However, it is less clearly polemic. The fight for memory, for beating the trauma resulting from the disaster and its accompanying, continued fear takes place in a hidden manner. This resistance lies in a sustained strategy of invalidating memory as such, in scuttling specific projects (a good example of that is a film by Jerzy Zalewski *Roj's History [Historia Roja]*[6]), in passivity and indifference, and to a lesser extent in direct persuasion. However, due to the perseverance of the actions of many people and institutions – including Gołębiewski, and above all, due to the social

[4] M. Kula indicates generational transformation as one of the factors contributing to the transformation of memory: M. Kula, *Między przeszłością a przyszłością. O pamięci, zapominaniu i przewidywaniu*, Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, Poznań 2004, p. 148.

[5] More properly should be “shows” because *Quarter L [Kwatera Ł]* is the first part of an intended four-film series. The second part, dedicated to the families of the victims, has already been made, but at the time of

writing this text it had not yet been shown (premiere announced on 7 May, 2014). The following parts are supposed to deal with the characters of executioners and victims.

[6] The completion of a feature film realized in 2010, which was devoted to one of the accursed soldiers, Mieczysław Dziemieszkiewicz, was permanently blocked by the Polish Film Institute and the Polish Television in the postproduction stage.

reaction expressed, resistance has proven to be ineffective. An example of this is the production of the fifth and sixth series of a popular TV drama *Days of Honour* (*Czas Honoru*, 2012–2013), or TVP (Polish public television) buying the license for *Quarter L* (*Kwatera Ł*) and co-producing the next part of the series, and above all, parliamentary approval for establishing a national holiday on March 1, dedicated to the memory of the soldiers of the anticommunist underground.

It should be noted that the atmosphere of this difficult struggle for the rank and the shape of Polish memory has released creative energy in their creators, such as the author of *Quarter L* (*Kwatera Ł*), which is reason for optimism. However, at the same time, this atmosphere is blocking the maturation to a properly rooted, coherent, truth-based and an appropriately nuanced picture of the past in Polish society.

Calling Arkadiusz Gołębiowski a director of memory – besides the fact that it is a handy formula leading to reflection on his work – is the deepest and fullest characteristic of this work. Not only has it been functionalized around the process of shaping collective memory, but this memory has been chosen as the key topic. In Gołębiowski's works, there is not a single film that would not significantly refer to this topic. We are talking not so much about historical films in the strict sense, but about films about memory. Beginning with *Crashed Stone* (*Rozbity kamień*, 2005), about a contemporary meeting between two commanders, who in 1945 as a part of the pacification of “underground bands” faced each other, leading to a short-term truce, to *The Track of the Accursed* (*Tropem wyklętych*, 2014), which shows the process of restoring the memory of the accursed through music productions dedicated to them.

The fictionalized *The Story of the Kowalski Family* (*Historia Kowalskich*) has a complex narrative memory frame. Teresa Kowalczyk, standing in front of the camera, has been appointed as the primary source of account of the events of December, 1942. She was born after the war – the daughter of Janek, the only person who survived the drama of the Kowalski family. At the age of thirteen, sitting in an unlocked room next door, she heard from a child's perspective, unnoticed by anyone, the stories recorded by a journalist about her grandparents' family having been burnt together with some local Polish and Jewish families. The heroine is holding the newspaper in which she has found an article based on the story. The situation of “listening” to the previously unknown family history was staged in front of the camera. It is only through this staging that we enter “legally” in the reality images from the 1930s and 1940s. These images are constantly counterpointed by a return to the intermediate narrative situation (eavesdropping on the aunt's relation), and even more often by the generally short, dynamic living witnesses' accounts of the events which had occurred almost seventy years before the movie was shot. There are also archival photographs, and the Kowalski family photo is revitalized by staging the moment of its taking.

The authors, therefore, aim to provide strong support in the space of communicative memory.[7] Additionally, through a strong integration of images of the past and the present (a scene at a shopping centre placed before the opening credits, overlapping sound plans, presenting the contemporary Kowalski family, descendants of the rescued Janek, etc.) they seek to bridge the gap and strengthen the identification with the represented reality. The viewer has to enter into the role of an engaged eye-witness. These actions are supposed to lead to strengthening the credibility of the message.

Immersion in the concreteness, reconstruction, the presence of traces – these are some of the basic conditions for the creation of memory, which here are clearly satisfied. Another one is the effect of the medium. The hidden past is articulated by the language of contemporary culture, and thus obtains a chance for deeper social reaction. Reconstruction is, in fact, only a means, the end turns out to be the creation of senses[8] relevant to a contemporary person, myth-making senses that release from trauma, ethical and political senses. Their creation, in the case of this film, is connected with the mission established by the authors, but it also clearly extends beyond the mission, which constitutes a special value of the film. Senses are not finished, fully defined, so a surplus remains.

Arkadiusz Gołębiowski in *Quarter L (Kwatera Ł)* used different tools to achieve similar objectives in the area of memory. The staging and the witnesses' account are replaced by images of work on the most valuable matter of the past, the remains of the victims. We gain insight into the past through participation, mediated by the film medium, in the process of its discovery (also in the literal sense). We follow the work in the exposed pits, the first doubts, measurements, interpretations, mining the finds to the ground surface, and then moving them carefully. We hear the electronic, sharp and persistent sensor sound that signals the presence of metal in the bones and small items (such as shoe soles, comb, medals, glasses case) located deeper in the ground. Statements by members of the exhumation team are introduced into the narration: diverse, saturated with emotions, certifying the quality of the project and the awareness of its participants. The camera captures the contact of these generally young people with the remains of human existence that have been extracted from the ground with delicacy and care. A shot appears where you can see a young archaeologist bent over a row of coffins already filled with bodies and who is discreetly stroking one of them. This is an intimate gesture, devoid of objective professionalism; it is emotional, but also symbolic. This means an authentic restoration of the deceased to life in the human community, and this life is, after

[7] A term by J. Assmann. cf. M. Saryusz-Wolska, "Wprowadzenie", in: *Pamięć zbiorowa i kulturowa. Współczesna perspektywa niemiecka*, Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, Kraków 2009, pp. 31–33.

[8] P. Zwierzchowski, *Kino nowej pamięci. Obraz II wojny światowej w kinie polskim lat 60*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, Bydgoszcz 2013, p. 139.

all, memory. This means establishing a relationship with the past – not merely archiving it, but experiencing it, situating it as a reference point for the present.

The image of rows of long bones and skulls of those who were murdered are exposed to the camera, and thus, an image of defeat devoid of any beauty becomes a reference point for creative memory. This highlights a puzzling issue; after all, the communist propaganda, and its mythology of victory enjoyed real success. A broad survey in 1973 showed that among the ten people who had the greatest merits in World War II, Poles placed seven Communists – including Karol Świerczewski.[9] However, the methods used to confiscate memory, used for falsification, substitution, disinheritance – different terms might be used here – proved ineffective ten years later, even while still under the communist regime. And the situation changed even more after the establishment of the Third Polish Republic.

For a time in the new conditions, the memory of the war and the period immediately after its end turned out to play a supporting role, up until the moment of the aforementioned explosion of the memory of the accursed. However, this is not the memory of the winners, but also not of the losers; innocent victims, in a deeper sense, do not belong to these categories. They function as a pattern, as a purveyor of values, a way of immortalization, an element co-creating a distinct community who speaks a mutually understood code. They may function this way for a long time if they begin to play an important role in forging political community[10].

Movements of memory are occasional, unexpected and awkward. Memory needs a stimulus, its work stems from a shock.[11] In *Quarter L* (*Kwatera Ł*), we are very tangibly in a situation of delving into the sources and of strengthening that shock radically. A member of the team, working at Łączka, talks to the camera about a significant situation that occurred during a previous exhumation: a grandson of one of the victims shows a photograph of his grandfather – a handsome, athletic, big man, while in a pit there lies an inconspicuous, small skeleton. “For me, it is impressive, and I think it is also for those people who are watching us” – she comments. This is one of several statements emphasizing the element of shock. The author tried to create the conditions for its viewers to share a similar experience. Therefore, he created an image of memory *in statu nascendi*, of a community touching the past that has been hidden so far and forming a broad social message about it.

The film touches upon history, but it talks about the present. It shows the birth and maturation of memory. Yet, we cannot anticipate to what extent the memory alliance between generations will be made and extended. Will showing on the screen the accursed soldiers’ children, now elderly people, in a relationship with the young exhumation team

[9] M. Kula, op. cit., p. 125.

[10] A. Assmann, 1998 – *między historią a pamięcią*, in: *Pamięć zbiorowa...*, p. 164.

[11] Eadem, *Przestrzenie pamięci. Formy i przemiany pamięci kulturowej*, in: *Pamięć zbiorowa...*, p. 110.

move viewers, breaking the resistance of state structures, into a sufficiently large social space. Nothing is inserted in the frames, thought over, fit into the existing convention. The people in front of the camera are full of enthusiasm, but also a little overwhelmed, lacking the confidence to play the role imposed. And thanks to this, we are dealing here with documentaries of high quality.

The film ends with the scenes in which coffins with nameless remains are being carried to a place of temporary deposit, and then a sequence from a press conference devoted to announcing the first identifications. Instead of skulls and bones, some photographs appear in the frame. We watch the calling of the names of the people whose remains will rest in their graves, an elementary triumph of memory over the fragility of matter and the technology of forgetting, a kind of resurrection in the temporal extent.

This metaphorical use of a strictly religious term may be regarded as justified for one more reason. The strategies that can be used to transform the history into the memory have already been discussed. [12] As for the Gołębiewski's films in question, this strategy is in the first place sacralization.

It has its source in the theme of martyrdom, most often voluntary, consciously accepted; the decisions of the families from Rekówka and most of those laid in Łączka were subject to a great deal of risk and the real prospect of death in the most dramatic circumstances. Obviously, approaches to martyrdom differ, but the essence and authenticity are identical. *The Story of the Kowalski Family (Historia Kowalskich)* builds the image of martyrdom in a more conventional way, partially based on a hagiographical pattern, from the idyllic scenes of family life, through moments of hesitation and fear, through the hiding of Jewish neighbours, to the image of a burning house full of people. In the work completed at Warsaw Powązki cemetery, tangible traces of it left in the ground are being exposed. Attributes of religiousness, although present, appear discreetly – a brief scene of solitary prayer in the church, the image of unearthed small devotional objects. It is enough for the metaphysical sense of sacrifice to remain clear. Only in the end, the exhumation team leader, Professor Krzysztof Szwagrzyk words the message of the holy place, enriched by the image of the cross. There is then a final confirmation of the sacral message that has been built from the very beginning.

It is not, of course, for the needs of films, that no other actions on the matter of history are performed, whether through necessary simplifications or concessions to correctness discourses. In the case of the film about the exhumation of the victims of the political secret police, such actions are less important, and what draws attention is the subtlety with which the author builds a common denominator for those buried in an anonymous quarter hidden from the world. After all,

[12] cf. note 1.

they represented different attitudes. The soldiers of the anticommunist underground prevailed among them, but there were also other people. The status of a Polish soldier, a prisoner of the highest authorities of the political secret police, and the ensuing fate of the victim and their family has become the common denominator for them. "Our heroes" is a collective formula that is most often used in the film to define them.

The Story of the Kowalski Family (Historia Kowalskich) is a bit different. The layer of reconstruction was balanced with special reverence in it. With regard to Poles, generally affirmative or neutral accents appear, but there are also a few scenes and statements indicating their shameful behaviour. In contrast, the Jewish community is completely idealized. Warm-hearted merchants, people who are loyal to the Polish state, and able to see their non-Jewish neighbours' reason, patiently enduring miserable hiding. This seductive vision of interpersonal understanding in the face of mortal danger would smack of excessive correctness if it were not for the witnesses' statements woven into the course of it. They add the necessary awkwardness to the message created. The statements of one of the women play a special role in this context. She eloquently draws the landscape of Polish-Jewish relations in a small town near Radom. She talks about the relative symbiosis, but also about those Jewish merchants who were able to "rip you off" or about Polish children who did not shake hands with their Jewish peers. She does not even spare herself. This is a strictly documentary element, without which this film could not do.

Gołębiewski's films are characterized by a fidelity to the facts. They also have distinct aesthetic ambitions: in addition to the aforementioned values, one can ascertain an interesting monochromaticity of the image in *Quarter L (Kwatera Ł)*, or its unusual editing, in which one smoothly, almost imperceptibly, shifts from a documenting to a commemorating narrative. The memory-creating function remains primary. It does not particularly interfere with the history, but is sometimes impoverishing in artistic terms. Yet this seems to happen to a relatively limited extent; nothing else remains but to accept the author's choice. All the more so because the choice is justified by the needs of the external situation, and therefore, it attests to the social servitude of art in a good sense of that expression.