

The Oak Tree

Schimmelgrün ist das Haus des Vergessens
Paul Celan, *Der Sand aus den Urnen*

Der Hauch des Nacht ist dein Laken,
die Finsternis legt sich zu dir
Paul Celan, *Schlaf und Speise*

Kerze bei Kerze, Schimmer bei Schimmer,
Schein bei Schein
Paul Celan, *Stilleben*

The text presented below is a true story told by Kazimiera, a woman who in 1941 saw the bodies of murdered Jews being dumped into a common grave in a forest in Western Poland. The author recalls the narration of Kazimiera in her own words as fixed in his memory. It is a point of interest for the author that he remembers Kazimiera using the exact same words in the countless retellings of her experience. Kazimiera is the author's grandmother.

It was in 1941. Early morning. A woman, her name was Kazimiera, was walking through the forest to the other village, Gosławice, for food stamps. She was 27 years old. She was a widow (30-year-old widows were at that time considered "normal") who lived with her son, Staszek. Staszek was at home, he was two years old. The house, which consisted of two rooms and a kitchen, was the home for twenty-seven people during the whole period of the war. The food stamps were for Kazimiera and Staszek. She earned money working as a seamstress.

The woman was walking through the forest. It is hard to say what she was thinking of. It is hard to imagine her face, hands, clothes. She walked on.

Suddenly she saw behind the trees what looked to be German soldiers (it is her story, not the story from the books written by historians or by writers, she did not say Nazis, but Germans). The German soldiers were shouting and throwing many naked bodies into a hole in the ground. She did not know whose bodies they were throwing into the hole. They were bodies of dead people, people who were murdered. There were many bodies. She stood behind the trees. There were many bodies and many soldiers with guns. She hid behind the trees. Trucks. There were trucks. „What should I do?” – she asked herself when she realized that she was watching something which she shouldn't have even seen. „How do I hide? Where

should I hide?" She was terrified. She did not know then that she was looking at the bodies of murdered Jews – men, women and children. She could not move, she could not think, she could not understand anything that was happening. She remembers how she felt as she tells the story many times over. She was just a simple woman who only wanted to get her food stamps for herself and for her child. She knew that she should not have been there at that time. But she was. She was there at that particular time and that particular place. Where the Jews were killed. The trees saw everything.

She remembers that a German soldier saw her and came to her. She did not remember when he came to her and from where. He asked her, "What are you doing here? What did you see?" He was shouting. She said that she didn't see anything, and that she was going to Gosławice for food stamps. They spoke German. Kazimiera knew German. She was born in Germany in 1914 in Rostock. Her parents went to Germany because they wanted to work, they found a job there and lived there for more than seven years. She spoke German and her first „Pater noster” was said in German. Then her parents came back to Poland.

Everything in that forest was terrible and incomprehensible. When she left home that morning she did not think that she would die; now it was obvious that she would be killed. Nothing is certain.

The soldier told her: „Start praying because it's going to be the last thing you do.” Kazimiera recalled after many years that at that time she thought about her son, Staszek, and started praying: „We fly to your patronage, O holy Mother of God”. She remembered only that she was frightened, that her body was shaking, she was scared and paralyzed. She saw only this soldier, she heard her own voice praying „We fly to your patronage”. She stood under an oak tree. She felt that she was about to die. (She herself never thought about how one man could decide whether another man should live or die.). It was wartime in her body and mind and it remained with her all through her life. The oak tree saw everything. She didn't see anything any more. She didn't see the naked bodies. She didn't even see herself.

She remembered a second voice. When she was praying. She heard a second voice. In her story the voice belonged to „A German Officer”. He asked the soldier who captured Kazimiera what he was doing with her and why he was going to shoot her. The soldier told him that she saw everything that is why she must be killed. It was obvious to him – no eyes, no memory. It was a time when the act of seeing, like the act of being, was an acceptable reason for death. She saw murdered beings.

It is strange: Kazimiera was a simple woman and she was not able to distinguish the military insignia, so how was she able to recognize the second soldier as „A German Officer”? Maybe because he gave the orders.

The officer asked her why she was walking through the forest, to where and for what. Then he asked her about everything that she saw in the forest. She said, "Nothing, sir. I did not see anything, sir". He also asked her where she was born and where she learned German. Kazimiera was poor and simple and lived in a very small village so her knowledge of German appeared to be a big surprise for him. She did not believe that what was happening was real. The officer stopped asking her questions. He was surprised.

He told to her: „Remember, do not tell anybody about anything that you have seen here. If you tell it to anybody, we will kill you and your family. Do you understand?" She answered: „Yes". They let her go, then she started running, she wanted to go back home. She cried sobbing on the way home. Staszek did not know anything. She "did not see anything". After what happened she lost the power to speak for several weeks. People wanted to know what had happened, why she had stopped talking. She knew that she could not say a word. A word for the world.

There are certain explanations as to why she began speaking about this event only after the death of Stalin in 1953. Whenever she started talking about it, she cried. If I remember well, she has never changed her story, or the words of the German soldiers, or the words of her prayer. Many years after this event she found out that there were Jews killed there – despite the fact that there was a Roman Catholic cross on the site and that at that place Polish citizens were killed. How did she find out the truth?

Kazimiera was my grandmother. She raised my sisters and me. She often told us about this place in the forest and what she had gone through. I remember that when I was in primary school (this was during the communist period) our class went to that place to commemorate the victims of the Second World War but I do not remember whether the word „Jews" was used then. Many times grandmother promised me that she would take me there and she would show me the oak tree under which she was praying „We fly to your patronage, O holy Mother of God". We meant to go many times, but I never did have enough time.

I do not know why I had never been there with my grandmother, why I never saw the tree where she hid and prayed at that cruel time. Which was that tree? Which oak tree was it? Maybe it was never a „proper" enough time for me to go there with her. Maybe I was too young, naive and stupid to understand then that her story was a part of history. I am not important in this story. After her death I went looking for that oak tree. I was never sure which one it was. Sometimes our questions grow more slowly than the time it takes for the answers to mature and eventually die.

About 1500 people died in the forest of Rudzica, Jews from the ghettos of Grodziec and Rzgów. Three years after the massacre, in 1944, the Germans wanted to hide this mass grave so they

ordered the bodies to be dug out and burned. Burn the traces? They killed all these Jews twice. The second „killing” of these dead people refers to the fear of their presence among the living. From a modern perspective we can treat it as a form of fear of memory. Presently there are monuments which commemorate the killing of the Jews and the burning of their bodies. Monuments commemorating their deaths – the first killing – and monuments commemorating the fear of memory of their deaths – the second killing.

This oak tree is now starting to grow in me. The oak must have seen. I must remember, not only my grandmother’s name and her son, Staszek, who died last year as an old man, but I must also remember the names of those who were killed in the forest of Rudzica, these people and their world which had been destroyed, even only by name. They also had names. Numbers are not names and overusing them in this context makes the numbers synonymous with the names.

As I write this, 70 years after the killing, 17 years after the death of my grandmother, and after many years studying about the Holocaust, I am not sure if I am not abusing the memory of the deaths of these people and the memory of my grandmother. The use of a word also brings with it a way of thinking, imagination and fictionalization. It is a form of imitation of feelings and perception. I can feel a wall in my language and in my mind. However I can see only through words and places.

Death is without any sense. Life might have some sense. Memory here is a compromise between sense and the lack of it. Overusing the Holocaust in this instance would be like the writings on a symbolical grave commemorating the fact that on this site Polish citizens were killed (refer to the photo at the beginning of this article). However, overuse can be hidden in every form of the “privatization” of death and the individual narration of it. Every question regarding this text is a question about our knowledge, ignorance, about our axiology and cognition. Overusing starts with each question that excludes, instrumentalizes, judges, aestheticizes, or reduces facts.

Maybe the use of sentences like: “The oak saw everything” or maybe the mere construction of this text, or every paragraph of it, maybe the expression of “me”, “I” – maybe all of these elements, which fuse together the styles and genres of writing and thinking are themselves signs of overuse? This is possible even when we remind ourselves that intention is not synonymous to cognition. In evoking something, even honestly, without an instrumental attitude, we can forget or omit something – that can also be a form of overusing. What does the sentence “The oak saw everything” mean in this context? My grandmother did not use any metaphors in talking about her experience. The overuse of the Holocaust – in the diversity of the discourses from artistic to the scientific – begins

when we forget that the Holocaust refers to the real, authentic destruction of people who were murdered. This story focuses on the Jews, they were the “aims” of the “final solution”, but we must also remember about other people who were killed by German soldiers and Nazi zealots (and their helpers), people who represented different forms of life, systems of values and traditions of culture.

Overusing the Holocaust is also a form of overusing of humanity.