

“Negotiating With the Dead”: On the Past of Auschwitz and the Present of Oświęcim

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A discothèque opened in the city of Oświęcim, known globally as ‘Auschwitz’, one mile from the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. What ensued was a heated discourse on the emerging theme of ‘dancing on old graves’ as the rights of the living and dead collided. In this article we explore the reactions to the opening of the controversial discothèque, examining their meaning in the larger context of the memory of the Holocaust and the collective identity of the people of Oświęcim. We begin with a theoretical review of concepts of collective identity, collective memory and collective narrative, and their intersection within positioning theory in order to place the case study in context. We integrate these concepts in the analysis of the case study, and discuss how in this situation the legacy of a traumatic history impacts Oświęcim citizens’ identity development.

“On the one side, Marx would be there telling us that we have to let go of the spirits of the past; we revolutionaries must let the dead bury the dead. On the other side Derrida tells us that it is not so easy to exorcise our ghosts; instead, in the name of justice, for those who have died, who have not yet died, and who have not yet been born, we must speak to and with the ghost.” (Pile, 2004, p. 210)

On 9 October 2000 *Newsweek* magazine carried an article, “Auschwitz: Dancing on Old Graves,” peppered with descriptions of scantily clad youth gyrating to techno beats in a disco plastered with posters promoting topless women Jell-O wrestling (Hammer, 2000).

“It could be a discothèque in any town in the world, but it isn’t: this establishment lies one mile down the road from Auschwitz-Birkenau, the notorious Nazi death camp, and on the exact site of an SS-run tannery in which hundreds of Jewish slave laborers perished” (Hammer, 2000, p. 49).

Twenty-five-year-old Oświęcim native, Antonina T., read the piece which detailed the opening of a discothèque and muttered, “It makes me sick!”¹ Antonina’s repugnance, however, flowed not from the fact that the disco had opened, rather she objected to the conflation of Auschwitz and Oświęcim, making her hometown once again the center of a brewing storm.

¹Pseudonyms have been used for interviewees throughout this article. Antonina T., 2006. Personal Discussion and interview by Jody Russell Manning. Oświęcim, Poland. 12 June 2006, 16:00.

In Oświęcim, numerous previously contested issues had been seemingly resolved by 2000, such as the Carmelite convent controversy in which the convent, originally part of the Auschwitz camp, not museum, was relocated to a different site in 1993, or the religious symbol controversy, in which a heated debate arose over whether the cross erected at Auschwitz should be left standing, and whether any symbol is appropriate or acceptable in or around Auschwitz.² Furthermore, UNESCO zoning laws concerning development had been passed delineating both the Auschwitz museum, and a buffer zone in which businesses were prevented from developing in order to preserve an appropriate environment within the walls of the remains of Auschwitz. The discothèque was outside the official buffer zone. Still, the news story flowed from an intransigent question: was the discothèque disrespectful to the memory of Auschwitz and its survivors, or did it restore life to a town that lives in death? Outside perception has long dictated that the citizens who live around the area of the former largest death camp in the world should act respectfully. Indeed, western attitudes reflect a belief that living in 'Auschwitz' is all but unimaginable. At the very least, inhabitants could not, or should not, laugh, smile, or worst of all *disco-dance* in close proximity to mass graves.

This is a question of life, but how to balance life in a place symbolized by death? Historical memory held by people who live far away has imposed a social norm that prohibits ordinary behavior, or so it seemed to the youth of Oświęcim, for this was their disco, their recreation, and their life. In fact this is one of many examples of how Oświęcim must repeatedly contemplate the past while struggling to live in the present and plan for the future. The past and present collide continually in 'Auschwitz' and Oświęcim.

History is shaped by the way in which we remember it, and the inhabitants of Oświęcim, especially its youth, understand that "Disco Auschwitz" has more symbolic impact than its actual name "Disco System." What at first appears to be a business endeavor for one and a place of entertainment for others ultimately develops into an international discussion of memory, mourning, and heritage in which a traumatic history continues to affect those living in the present. While this case study may be approached in various ways due to its thorny historical layers and moral implications, we purposefully view it through a socio-psychological lens that brings into focus dynamics of a traumatic history that influence collective identity, memory and narrative.

How do memory and symbolism tilt the balance of city life? In this article we explore the controversial reactions to the opening of the discothèque, and their meaning in the larger context of the memory of the Holocaust and the collective identity of the people of Oświęcim. We begin with a theoretical review of concepts of collective identity, collective memory and collective narrative, and their intersection within positioning theory in order to place the case study in context. We integrate these concepts in the analysis of the case study, and discuss how in this case, the legacy of a traumatic history impacts the development of the people of Oświęcim.

² More information concerning the Carmelite Convent controversy can be found in Bartoszewski (1990), or Rittner & Roth (1991). Discussion of the Religious Symbol controversies can be found in Zubrzycki (2006), or Berger, Cargas & Nowak (2004).

CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Collective Identity

For the purpose of this case study, we adopt a definition of collective identity that addresses both within-group sense of belonging as well as between-group relations through notions of self and other. We draw upon social identity theory to contextualize collective identity within collective memory and collective narrative.

Social identity theory, originally coined by John Turner and Henri Tajfel, is based on the analysis of dynamics of self within a group context, intra-group, and inter-group interactions (Hogg & Tindale, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Within this theoretical framework, a distinction exists between personal identity and social identity (Hogg & Tindale, 2005). Personal identity focuses on traits and attributes of an individual, but is also influenced by the context of collective belonging. One is not only defined by his traits and attributes, but also by those traits and attributes that he perceives connect him to a group: “given a meaningful social and cultural identity to hold onto, identification extends to its successes and failures, privileges and lack of privileges” (Bar-On, 2008, p. 6). This concept is further layered by the fact that an individual belongs to several groups simultaneously, and the prominence of his identification with each group shifts based on circumstances.

Social identity defines individuals in relation to others. This comparison happens both within a group, where an individual would examine traits and attributes that define him as a member of a group, and between groups, where a group examines traits and attributes that account for differences among groups (Hogg & Tindale, 2005). While social identity defines an individual in relation to a group he belongs to, collective identity is a reflection of the norms and values that the identification to the group entails for that individual (Brewer, 2001). Both collective identity and social identity are vague concepts that differ within the field in which they are defined. In the case of this article, we conceptualize social identity and collective identity as the two facets of a coin: while there is a distinction between both terms, they both define the individual in relation to and with his group.

Between-group differences, and within-group similarities both contribute to the definition of a group’s collective identity. These differences and similarities are subjective: they are accentuated in order to delineate more distinct groups. An individual may foster a sense of belonging through acknowledgment of similarities to other members within a group. That group then promotes belonging by emphasizing the perceived homogeneity of traits and attributes of its members. Perceived homogeneity is further emphasized by a contrast to perceived differences of others that do not belong to the group (Valsiner, 2007).

Finally, collective identity is a fluid process rather than a fixed structure (Bar-On, 2008). The process of its construction and re-construction is based on narrative and memory (Bar-On, 2008). Collective identity is thus understood within the context of time: over time, events occur that shape identity as they become incorporated into collective memory.

Narrative becomes the means by which collective memory is transmitted, through which the past is brought into the present, unifying a group both in time and space, reinforcing collective identity (Eyerman, 2004). Narrative is produced in the context of memory – it becomes the tool that situates identity within the cognitive map of memory (Eyerman, 2004). The memories and narratives are framing mechanisms: they include and exclude certain events and voices in order to produce and maintain collective identity and to continue to foster belonging within the group (Eyerman, 2004).

In sum, collective identity is built from collective memory, and the narratives that transmit those memories. Identity is fluid. It defines the self in context of the group, and the group in context of other groups. Collective identity is subjective: it is perceived and constructed. We now further elaborate on concept of collective memory and narrative to elucidate how these contribute to defining collective identity.

Collective Memory

Collective memory is transmitted from one generation to the next through use of the media, commemorative rituals, or grounded symbols (Assman, 2008). Over time, collective memory gradually becomes more homogeneous and institutionalized as the function of transmission shifts from the people bearing witness and the political elite recording these memories, to the political elite reporting these now unified recorded memories to future generations (Assman, 2008). Collective memory is thus constructed in the context of the present culture – and not the past – it both shapes and is shaped by groups.

Collective memory is understood as having two functions: cognitive and conative (Assman, 2008; Poole, 2008). The former function situates memory as a consistent and stable source of information that is utilized as a cognitive map for identity and meaning construction (Eyal, 2004; Poole, 2008). The latter function situates memory within the realm of the uncertain and unstable that must be resolved by future generations (Eyal, 2004). Conative memory is derived from Nietzsche's concept of "will to memory", that is, the underlying and unstated responsibility that is carried by memory. This notion of responsibility makes future generations accountable for past generation wrongdoings in order to achieve resolution and reparation (Eyal, 2004). The responsibilities carried by memory involve remembering, *what* is to be remembered, and what it *means* to remember (Eyal, 2004). Conative memory therefore represents the transmission of responsibility, while cognitive memory represents the transmission of information.

Collective memories are both cognitive and conative: they record the past and remind us of the commitments that this past implies for present generations (Poole, 2008). The dual function of collective memories establishes connection within groups by making memories significant to each member of the group (Poole, 2008).

We purposefully hold onto collective memory via media, museums and commemorative ritual. These mediums emphasize the relationship between the personal and political, the individual and the collective with regards to memory and mourning: "It is not simply a case of whether grieving should be private or national, and *whose* story should be told, but also

a question of how to negotiate the necessary relation between them” (Edkins, 2003, p. 94). Collective memory, therefore, much like collective narrative, is filtered and framed to create a sense of homogeneity within a group. It is subjective.

Collective Narrative or ‘Heritage’

Collective narrative and collective memory coexist much like pictures and words in a storybook, both are processes and framing mechanisms. Collective narrative is a unifying discourse that creates and maintains a collective through a composition of fictional thought and truth (Nancy, 1991). Collective narrative, defined by David Lowenthal as ‘heritage’, is subjective, unlike history, which aims to be objective. While history places the past in the past, heritage links the past and present to create a more intense association of belonging of a group to its ancestry by making the past ‘domestic’ rather than ‘foreign’ (Lowenthal, 1996). Heritage manipulates the past – and thus collective memory – to suit the purpose of the present through inclusion of some facts and exclusion of others in the favor of those whose purpose is being served (Lowenthal, 1996). Anthony Giddens (1991) names this process of shaping and reshaping, a ‘continuous reflexive endeavor’: “we create, maintain and amend sets of narratives to conform to our perceptions of events” (Bar-On, 2008, p. 5). The fluidity of identity is exemplified by the narration and re-narration of the past, the official and unofficial histories – and memories – of a collective, and the myths and counter myths of any given group (Valsiner, 2007).

Heritage sustains theories of identity: it fosters both a need for unification within group and a need for a single distinct identity, as well as enhancing differences that distinguish ‘self’ from the ‘other’. Narratives not only communicate a sense of collective identity, they constitute it (Fuchs, 2002). This relationship between heritage and identity is vital.

Bridging Concepts of Collective Identity, Memory and Narrative Through Positioning Theory

Collective identity is constructed and reconstructed from accumulated and interpreted collective memories, selected through framing to include and exclude both memories and voices so as to create a cohesive whole. Collective narrative – heritage – thus becomes a framing mechanism, which creates a story that reflects the collective identity of a group by using the content of collective memories. This story line is fluid as well, shifting over time based on new experiences and encounters with other groups.

In the case study of the Disco System presented here, concepts of collective identity, memory, and narrative work together and intersect over issues of rights and duties. Rights are what is demanded of others, while duties are what is owed to others (Moghaddam & Kavulich, 2007). In positioning theory, rights and duties are patterned so as to create positions, and positions set boundaries as to what is appropriate for individuals or groups to do within a cultural context (Moghaddam & Kavulich 2007). Arguments on rights and duties define the self and other as deserving and undeserving, thus also influencing personal identity and collective identity through ‘story lines’ or narratives (Moghaddam & Kavulich, 2007). Thus, rights and duties shape identity, and vice versa, through a process of

narrative: who one is, is defined partly by the position one takes in conversations both with oneself and with others, and that position depends on what rights and duties are within focus at that moment in time (Harré, Moghaddam, Pilkerton Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009).

Positions comprise groups of rights and duties (Harré et al., 2009). These rights and duties also emerge from past experiences, or, more precisely, from collective memory of past experiences that shape how rights and duties are defined. Rights and ideas about rights – like identity – are malleable, they change and are negotiable based on shifts that occur during group interactions (Moghaddam & Kavulich, 2007). Finally, positioning theory focuses on the creation of meaning that emerges from interconnected aspects of interpersonal interaction (Harré et al., 2009).

We explore the case study of the Disco System controversy through a lens of concepts of collective identity, memory and narrative, and with an eye to dynamics of rights and duties as defined by positioning theory. We present the controversy and then analyze it utilizing the above described concepts and theoretical framework.

CASE STUDY: DISCO SYSTEM

“Dancing on the graves of the victims? Please. The tannery is not on the grounds of the Auschwitz camp. It’s a mile from the camp. It’s an abandoned building, one of many abandoned buildings in that area apparently, and only incidentally one that housed a business during the war that was supplied with slave labor by the SS. The people of Oswiecim [sic] are trying to go [on] with their lives, and I for one think we should leave them alone [to] do so. You don’t think the forced maintenance of the camp itself a mile out of town isn’t lasting punishment enough?”³

Jerzy Meysztowicz, deputy governor of the Małopolska province (in which Oświęcim is located), revoked permission for a discothèque to be established in a building, which was formerly utilized by Nazi Germany during World War II. The repeal came after protests from the ‘The International Youth Meeting Center’ (IYMC).⁴ The IYMC criticized that the noise from the disco, to be located 50 yards from the Center, would disturb visitors, disrupting its mission of reconciliation between Poles and Germans. The initial investing company pulled out and the case seemed to be closed. Less than a year later, however, a new anonymous investor took over. The administrator of Oświęcim, Adam Bilski,

³ Posted by *M. Polo* at 1:37 PM PST on 18 August 2000 in response to *rebeccablood*’s forum title: “‘An investor has obtained permission to operate a discotheque in a former tannery where Auschwitz inmates worked and died, an official said yesterday, and a TV report said it was already open for business.’ I’m not even outraged by this. It just makes me numb.” Open Web community discussion forums, such as ‘Metafilter’, are a very informative source for a wide range of views and opinions of political, social and, religious issues. Due to their anonymity, individual posters are not restricted discussing sensitive and emotionally charged issues, such as the discothèque controversy. MetaFilter: Community Weblog, <<http://www.metafilter.com/2915/>> (accessed 1 January 2009).

⁴ Międzynarodowy Dom Spotkań Młodzieży w Oświęcimiu, or International Youth Meeting Center is an education center, established in 1986 with donations from Poland (including the city of Oświęcim) and German individuals and institutions. Groups take part in the Polish-German reconciliation process and in Christian-Jewish dialogue. IYMC <<http://www.mdsmp.pl/>> (accessed 1 January 2009).

confirmed that a development plan was approved in 1989 by the city council to allow the tannery building to be used for various purposes (Pasek, 2000).

Opposing views came to light in the international press. Oświęcim's affairs were being discussed in the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *CNN*, *Central Europe Review*, world-wide-web communities, and *The Warsaw Voice*. This conflict quickly turned into more than just an urban development disagreement. Adam Bilski justified the controversial location by stating, "The investor has the right to decide what happens on his land... the building where the disco has been opened is not the same building in which prisoners died that one is long gone. There are many places where prisoners were killed. For instance, the Germans used prisoners to modernize most of the streets of Oświęcim" (Warsaw Voice, 2000). However, the head of IYMC, Leszek Szuster, had a more social and ethical issue with the establishment of a discothèque.

"We [IYMC] are not against having the disco in the city, but this does not mean that our guests should be confronted with it... All around the world, there is a principle of not opening discos near hospitals, churches and places like this" (Warsaw Voice, 2000).

As the controversy unfolded, the main issue stemmed from the fact that the disco building was a former tannery utilized by the SS from 1942 to 1945 for slave labor of an estimated 1,000 prisoners from the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp (Pasek, 2000). It is presumed that prisoners died on site. Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum historians confirmed the history of the building, adding that it was also used to store Jewish prisoner plundered goods and hair of Jewish victims of the gas chambers before being shipped off to the Nazi German *Reich*. However, Disco System's owner, Rafal Waliczek argued that it is outside of the 'zone' "in which all commercial activity is banned and that his premises are not the original tannery, as most historians contend, but a factory erected in 1952" (Cohen, 2000). The former-tannery is 2 Km from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. The distance is important, for it places the building outside of the "zone of protection" established due to its inception as a UNESCO World Heritage site.⁵ Businesses and commercialization are restricted *within* the zoning.

In early August 2000 'Disco System' opened causing continued external protest and controversy. The International Jewish human rights organization based in the United States, The Simon Wiesenthal Center, sent representatives to meet Oświęcim's mayor, Jozef Krawczyk, demanding the disco's immediate closure. "[A disco] in the immediate vicinity of the largest Jewish graveyard in history, amounts to an affront", while "local authorities have said they can do little because the dance club is on private property" (Cohen, 2000). This issue was not affecting local Poles exclusively, in late August 2000, survivors joined

⁵ The 1600-meter 'Zone of Protection' surrounds both the Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II complexes established by the Museum. The Museum website states: "The Museum grounds cover 191 hectares, of which 20 are at Auschwitz I and 171 at Auschwitz II-Birkenau. A buffer zone for the Museum grounds in Birkenau was established in 1962, and a similar zone at Auschwitz I in 1977. Both zones were revised in 1999 under the terms of a new law on the protection of the sites of Nazi death camps. The main idea behind the establishment of the buffer zone was the protection of the authentic context of the Memorial and the provision of essential security". ABSM Website <<http://www.auschwitz.org.pl/new/index.php?language=EN&tryb=stale&id=426>> (accessed 1 January 2009).

historians and Jewish leaders in the objection against the local government for approving the discothèque. A survivor, head of the International Auschwitz Council, and Poland's foreign minister, Władysław Bartoszewski, openly condemned the opening of the disco stating: "the decision was made without input from historians and contradicted the position of provincial authorities" (CNN, 2000).

Columnist for the *Miami Herald*, Leonard Pitts, summed the outside perceptions of memory, life, and controversy when he stated that the '*Never Again*' becomes '*Maybe Never Again*' (2000). His commentary on 'Disco System' included a brief history of the wartime former-tannery building, but his stark view seems to show his foregone conclusion when he commented, "now, a nightspot sits there, with strobe lights, throbbing music and topless women wrestling in a pit of Jell-O" (Pitts, 2000). He described how the Wiesenthal Center considered asking visitors who were planning a trip to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum to boycott the city of Oświęcim. Pitts wrote that the representative for the Wiesenthal Center, Rabbi Abraham Cooper, understands and sympathizes with Oświęcim's inhabitants. The Rabbi reiterated what the city feels when it asks, "How long will we have to go on being associated with the greatest crime in history?" And the Rabbi's answer was: "forever" (Pitts, 2000). Leonard Pitts (2000) concluded his column with:

"We would remember, forever. We would not allow this suffering to be in vain. There's a sense of having failed the obligation of history. And it makes you mourn for the lessons we were unable to teach, for the promise we were unable to keep, for the fact that we did not become better, after all. And for the young people who would go to a graveyard and dance."

The controversy culminated in the closing of the disco. Welcomed by the Polish government, Polish spokesman, Krzysztof Luft, commented that the closing would "remove a serious source of tensions." And that is exactly what it did. "Governor Maslowski ordered the closure [of the discothèque] by revoking a construction permit for the building", CNN reported in April (2001a). However, the government had no legal means to close the club. In late 2001, the landlord of 'Disco System', nevertheless, made the decision to acquiesce. Zbigniew Sroczynski, stated, "We decided to end the conflict, the whole fiasco was simply not worth the battle. We want to have some peace and quiet and live as *normal people*" (CNN, 2001b). *Reuters* and *CNN* reported, "Sroczynski said he would not renew a contract with the club's owners when the present agreement runs out in November" (CNN, 2001b). Though a club would no longer be there, other economic reasoning was proposed to utilize the land. Sroczynski stated,

"In the disco's place, a shopping centre would be built and that a plaque of remembrance honoring the victims of Auschwitz-Birkenau would be put up. Plans for the shopping complex have been approved by the local authorities and international Auschwitz groups, which had protested against the existence of the discothèque." (CNN, 2001b)

On 10 September 2001 the Simon Wiesenthal Center expressed relief in a press release: "This is a welcome, but long overdue gesture to the victims of Auschwitz, but this is a controversy that should never have happened in the first place." Though the discothèque was considered inappropriate, it was outside the 'zone' and a distance from the museum.

But the closing and the disagreement over its existence are what is remembered. This controversy is an example of how and why the youth of Oświęcim feel they are oppressed by a past that is overpowering the present and affecting their future. For them, the shadow of Auschwitz looms over their lives, and more importantly over the (lack of) development of their hometown.

THREADS OF ANALYSIS

The Disco System controversy is layered, complex, and thorny. What we aim to do in this analysis is to untangle as much as possible the interconnected pieces of this controversy: issues of collective identity, collective memory, narratives of rights and duties, and the legacy of a traumatic history.

Why the Controversy? The Conflation of Auschwitz and Oświęcim

Oświęcim is defined by its experiences, particularly the Nazi annexation and development. Auschwitz is a symbolic representation of the atrocities of the Holocaust, a graveyard for the bodies of the over one million people gassed, and reflective of the trauma scar remaining from the aftermath of the Holocaust. The town's 700 year-old history is null and void⁶: whatever history existed of Oświęcim prior to Auschwitz has been eclipsed – forgotten and replaced by the atrocities of the death camps. The establishment of Disco System re-opened the metaphorical wound of the Holocaust, rupturing perceived continuity of time and space designated by boundaries of past and present, of 'here' and 'there' (as defined by the UNESCO zoning laws). While the citizens of Oświęcim struggle to have their town recognized as separate from Auschwitz, the international community continues to conflate the two so that Oświęcim is merely an extension of Auschwitz, and is thus nicknamed 'the City of Death'.

In the eyes of Marja U. and Jozefina K., two local youth, the city of Oświęcim is continually shaped by politics, in turn affecting their families' lives. Employment growth, or lack thereof, is 19 year-old student Marja U.'s main concern. In her eyes the politics of the Nazi past affect her employment options as well as the city's urban development, "Oświęcim's

⁶ Founded around 1270, Oświęcim had become a midsize market town of 120 to 200 households by 1300. Polish-Jewish relations were outwardly typical, and by the twentieth century, Oświęcim was known as the "Polish Jerusalem." Geographically, the majority of the Polish Jewish community lived in the city proper, while the Polish Christian peasants lived in the surrounding villages. By the time of the Great War, fifty percent of the Oświęcim populace was Jewish and the other half Roman Catholic with an additional small number of minorities. Polish memory states that Polish-Jewish relations in the city of Oświęcim were amicable. Historically, Christians and Jews in Poland lived a seemingly separate life and there were no pogroms or major violent acts in this particular city. Brutality and violence, however, would descend upon the Oświęcim populace - changing social life eternally - from the Germanic West during World War II. Communism took hold postwar leaving its own utopian mark as well. Today, there are an estimated 43,000 inhabitants in the city of Oświęcim. The town lies at the confluence of the Soła and Wisła rivers and borders three important economic regions, providing a complex transportation hub between major metropolitan areas. Boasting as a training ground for Polish Olympic swimmers, Oświęcim has a 'Center of Culture', town square, castle, and an official 'Ice Hockey Team'. Though academic works mainly focus upon the WWII period, more information on the history of the city can be found in Dwork & van Pelt (1996), as well as Steinbacher (2000), and Skalińska-Dindorf (2001).

growth is stunted”, she stated.⁷ “[This] city is seen as the ‘City of Death’, no one lives here, [there is] no development. There will only be the Museum in Oświęcim in five years,” Jozefina K. agreed.⁸

Marja U. sees the complexities and the difficulties in managing history and memory. “There should be a balance between Museum and city – other cities develop but Oświęcim does not. Oświęcim is different.”⁹ The message of education and the significance of the museum are important to the youth, but they struggle with the sense of balance. Trying to find equilibrium between memorial and life, twenty-one year-old Marcianna Z. repeated that,

“many people died and it [the museum] is a special place. We should not forget about this, but we should live life normally. Remember about the past, but take care of the place, talking to younger people about what happened here.”¹⁰

Marcianna’s words reflect the complexities implicated in the transmission of traumatic experiences of the past to her generation.

For Ewa G. the collective perceptions of the town and its inhabitants are dictated by ‘Auschwitz’. “People see Oświęcim as one big camp where people were dying. And if someone lives here it is weird.”¹¹ She hears this “generally from people who live farther away from city.” When Ewa G. meets someone who has not met the inhabitants of Oświęcim, “they ask if people really live there.” Antonina T. expressed her frustrations with the ever-looming ‘Auschwitz’: “everything in our lives surrounds Auschwitz, so we are tired of talking about ‘The Auschwitz’.”¹²

Collective Identity, Memory, and Narrative

The citizens of Oświęcim are in a difficult position: they are aiming to define their collective identity in the present, but this identity is affected by collective memory of Auschwitz, which belongs not only to them, but to the global community as well. The Holocaust has been incorporated into the narrative of several groups who were affected by it. The tension arises not only over how collective memory of the Holocaust is preserved through memorialization at Auschwitz, but also over who is responsible for preserving it, how this memory will ultimately impact collective narrative and thus define collective identity.

⁷ Marja U., 2006. Personal Discussion and Interview by Jody Russell Manning. Oświęcim, Poland. 25 July 2006, 19:00.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Marcianna Z., 2006. Personal Discussion and Interview by Jody Russell Manning. Oświęcim, Poland. 16 June 2006, 16:00.

¹¹ Ewa G., 2006. Personal Discussion and Interview by Jody Russell Manning. Oświęcim, Poland. 28 July, 2006, 18:00.

¹² Antonina T., 2006. Personal Discussion and interview by Jody Russell Manning. Oświęcim, Poland. 12 June 2006, 16:00.

Here we return to issues of the conative function of memory: the legacy of responsibility that it creates for future generations in its intergenerational transmission. Auschwitz is not only a site of transmission of memory and information, but also the transmission of responsibility and emotion (Assman, 2008; Poole, 2008). The memory of traumatic events, unlike 'conventional' memory, is often affected by terror of the experience (Young, 1997). Auschwitz has deep emotional significance and symbolism. It is a multi-layered symbol of memorialization that is difficult to define, taking on different meanings at various times for each individual or group. Some may consider it a museum, a former camp, a tourist destination, or educational tool, while others may see it as sacred or as the largest cemetery on earth. In most of the Western world, Auschwitz evokes images of evil and horror; a virtual 'Hell on Earth', where many suffered and over a million people were murdered.

As Karen E. Till points out, "Unless we consciously remember the ways that absences constitute the [violent] histories of nations, there will always be a gap, a willed amnesia, inherited phantoms that will continue to haunt" (2005, p. 24). This is not only central for the future remembrance of the ghosts of Auschwitz, but is more important for the future of the living city of Oświęcim – where enigmatic ghosts of the death camps envelop every day life creating a space of liminality. Within this space there is neither here nor there, no past or present, and the dead are not let to die, while the living are not left to live.

Legacies of a Traumatic Historical Site

Trauma engenders a struggle over memory and narration as it is often repressed or denied (Edkins, 2003; LaCapra, 1998). The contestation of collective memory and narrative affects patterns of remembering and forgetting. Some types of collective memory lead to forgetting, while other types of memory remain 'unspeakable', producing an abyss of silence and only partial transmission of experiences from one generation to the next (Edkins, 2003). These dynamics of denial, repression, forgetting, and silence, affect the process of collective identity formation. They become a part of the framing mechanisms by which collective identity is created. Therefore, while the trauma of Auschwitz is not a trauma lived by the youth of Oświęcim, its legacy affects them, because it breaches both continuums of time and space.

Trauma cannot be remembered as "something that took place in time, because this would neutralize it", rather it must be encircled in order to reiterate and emphasize its "impossibility" (Edkins, 2003, p. 15). The Disco System controversy brought to the surface insidious dynamics of a historical trauma legacy that continues to exist. Scholars of trauma such as Dominick LaCapra (1998; 2004), Judith Herman (1992), Cathy Caruth (1995) contend that trauma is much like an open wound that will not heal, or an infectious disease: it contaminates, spreads past boundaries of time and space, its memories refusing to sink into the past. Trauma creates a history that has no place in the past where it was never fully experienced, or in the present where it cannot fully be comprehended (Caruth, 1995). It stops the chronological clock. It continues to exist in the present (Van der Kolk & Van der Hart, 1995).

Specifically, a memory site such as Auschwitz, is also a trauma site. How traumatic a site is, depends on how much mourning has occurred over the trauma (LaCapra, 1998). Mourning is elusive because the trauma legacy wavers between repression, denial, forgetting, and remembering both on an individual and collective level. Forgetting traumatic memory is connected to alternate patterns of repetition and reliving, or re-enacting past trauma “whether in more or less controlled artistic procedures or in uncontrolled existential experiences, of hallucinations, flashbacks, dream, and re-traumatizing breakdown triggered by incidents that more or less obliquely recall the past” (LaCapra, 1998, p. 10). The content and emotions of memories that are initially buried through these different mechanisms resurface in different forms later.

The reaction to the opening of Disco System indicates a resurfacing of an unresolved legacy of trauma. While over sixty years have passed since the end of the Holocaust, ‘Auschwitz’ – representative of the atrocities of the Holocaust – remains alive and preserved in the present, thus challenging the continuum of time. The past is not in the past, but remains in the present, because even today, an old abandoned building remains the tannery, and a container for plundered goods and hair of Jews that were sent to the gas chambers. While the hair and plundered goods have long been removed, the site remains one haunted by images of the dead. Their imprint impacts the ability to see past it, and life cannot exist in a space that remains a container for a reminder of death.

The space boundaries determined by the UNESCO zoning laws that demarcate ‘here’ and ‘there’ is also elusive: Disco System was developed outside the buffer zones for business construction, yet was treated as if it had been built within them. Even zoning laws cannot facilitate a structure that encapsulates the trauma site and places it where it ‘belongs’. Here again the trauma site supersedes all concept of time and space, it disrupts the continuity and resists confinement. The trauma that happened in Auschwitz spreads beyond the boundaries of the former death camp.

The legacy of ‘Auschwitz’ as a trauma site is one possible explanation of how the conflation between Auschwitz and Oświęcim occurs. The nickname “City of Death” depicts a conflation that is both over space and time. Those who were murdered in Auschwitz continue to haunt Oświęcim long after their death. The citizens of Oświęcim have been ascribed the responsibility of ‘grave keepers’ by the conative function of the collective memory of the Holocaust. What arises within this conflation is a discourse of rights and duties between the citizens of Oświęcim and the different international groups of survivors, Jews and Auschwitz who represent the collective voice of the dead.

Discourse of Rights and Duties

At the establishment of the Disco System, what takes place is a controversy between the rights of the citizens of Oświęcim, and the rights of the victims of Auschwitz – the dead – and therefore, also the duties of the citizens towards the dead. The discourse of rights and duties exists within a dimension of conflated time and space described above. How long must the citizens of Oświęcim continue to honor the dead of Auschwitz? How present is the pain and suffering of the past? How close and therefore connected are Oświęcim and

Auschwitz? Is one mile – the distance between the former death camp and the disco – significant or not in determining the separation of space, of ‘here’ and ‘there’?

This discourse is illustrated by the use of the imagery of “dancing on the graves of victims” which is referenced frequently in the context of the controversy. This phrase places in contrast the rights of the citizens to “dance” – representative of their right to be joyous and carefree, to have a life – and the rights of the victims to rest in peace in their “graves”. As previously stated, M. Polo posted on an online forum in response to this phrase acknowledging both a cluster of rights of the people of Oświęcim to move beyond mourning, to exist outside and separate from the shadow of Auschwitz, to make decisions about the development of their town, and to privacy, as well as recognizing their ‘forced’ duty of the maintenance of the camp.

The discourse over the collective identity of Oświęcim has developed out of rights and duties, thus defining within this context, what is tasteful or distasteful, right or wrong, dignified or dishonorable. Different international articles use these words to define the actions of Oświęcim citizens. Ultimately the debate is one that has been defined as between Auschwitz (and its victims) and Oświęcim (and its citizens). The different groups involved within the controversy are positioned on one side or the other of the controversy. Those that support Disco System are rallying for the rights of the Oświęcim citizens to have a collective identity that is independent of the death camp – a history imposed upon them by the Nazis. This independence involves rights to have fun, develop economically, and have a choice as to how this occurs. It is the duty of international groups of Jews and survivors to recognize Oświęcim as separate from Auschwitz, and thus grant its citizens liberation from the Nazi past.

Those groups that do not support the discotheque describe it as an affront to the dead, to suffering that has taken place in the tannery, and in the nearby death camp. They refer to the rights of visitors to the death camp to be met with the somber and solemn atmosphere that reflects respect and honor for the collective memory of death and suffering, the rights of the dead to rest in peace, the rights of survivors to know that their past is not being forgotten. They see Oświęcim citizens as having a duty to remember, to respect, to serve under the shadow of Auschwitz, and to own Auschwitz as their history and legacy, as a part of their collective identity.

Specifically, the investor of the discotheque has the right to decide what happens to his land. The owner, Rafal Waliczek, has a right to run the discotheque as it is outside the zone in which commercial activity is banned. The landlord of the discotheque, Zbigniew Sroczynski, pleads to both the right of the citizens to live as ‘normal people’, and the duty of international groups to stop interfering with Oświęcim’s development: “We want to have some peace and quiet and live as *normal people*” (CNN, 2001b).

Yet a representative from the Simon Wiesenthal Center in the US, Rabbi Abraham, denounces this right, and calls for the duty to respect “the largest Jewish graveyard in history”, and to be “forever” “associated with the greatest crime in history” (Pitts, 2000). The head of the International Auschwitz Council further criticizes the owners for failing in

their duty to seek “input from historians” prior to making the decision to build the discotheque (CNN, 2000). The International Youth Meeting Center visitors have a right not to be disturbed by the noise of the discotheque, which is located only 50 yards from the center (Warsaw Voice, 2000). And while Leszek Szuster, the head of IYMC, acknowledges the right of Oświęcim citizens to have a discotheque in the city, he also holds citizens accountable for the duty to respect the principle “all over the world... of not opening discos near hospitals, churches and places like this” (Warsaw Voice, 2000).

At the conclusion of the controversy, the discotheque was shut down, and in its place were developed plans to build a shopping center with a plaque of remembrance honoring the victims of Auschwitz (CNN, 2001b). The plan received approval by both local authorities and international groups that had previously protested the discotheque (CNN, 2001b). This appeared to be a compromise of rights and duties – on the surface. The plaque would become a symbol of remembrance, honor, and respect for the rights of the victims. It would represent the recognition of the duties of Oświęcim citizens to continue remembrance, to acknowledge and own this history. The shopping mall also would fulfill the citizen rights for economic expansion, and its endorsement represents an acknowledgment on behalf of international groups that Oświęcim is indeed a town that deserves to develop.

This conclusion is uncomfortable though: it is like a metaphorical band-aid over this wound that never heals – to return to the way trauma has been described by its most renowned scholars. It is a compromise that fails to address the conflation of time and space that continues to happen at Oświęcim. To be sure, in the years following the closure of the discothèque, a new disagreement emerged over the development of the shopping mall (Dziennik Polski, 2002). The Wiesenthal Center protested the plans for the shopping mall that it previously approved, and Oświęcim mayor Józef Krawczyk was enraged that protests continued despite previous accord (Dziennik Polski, 2002). Tensions flared and plans were dropped. To this day, despite yet another plan to now build a superstore, the area of the former tannery remains a vacant lot (Polskie Radio, 2007). Oświęcim continues to be a town that is both living and dead, as youth continue to leave it to find a ‘normal life’ elsewhere, tired of living under the perpetual shadow of Auschwitz (Polskie Radio, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Oświęcim is both inhabited by citizens who are living, and in a sense, haunted by the ghosts of those who died within its historical sites such as the old I.G. Farben chemical plant, or close by within the confines of what used to be KL Auschwitz. There is a complex world picture to be seen that has been debated by media, politicians, and historians. While it may be difficult to reconcile life and death, commemoration and renewal, mourning and growth, past and present, a difficult discourse continues in the aim to replace strife with cohesion.

The case study presented here brings to light how concepts of collective identity, memory and narrative are constantly being negotiated, not just within groups, but among them. Oświęcim citizens are not the only ones negotiating their collective identity: other groups that are connected to the town through shared collective memory and history become a part of the narrative that informs the citizens’ collective identity. Discourse of rights and

duties frames and re-frames the past, layering a series of complex images in the creation and re-creation of collective identity. A traumatic historical event such as the Holocaust then also filters within these layers to add silence and blurred or repressed images to this process of identity formation, so that collective identity is not simply formed by collective memory and narrative but also by the absence thereof. Thus, the 'holes' become a part of the 'whole'.

The Disco System controversy is only one case study, one incident that has surfaced the complexities of developing collective identity in the shadow of a legacy of trauma. Further research ought to explore other groups in which similar circumstances exist, groups that carry a legacy of trauma, such as Jewish-Israelis or others affected by the Holocaust, but also groups of other genocides, such as Rwandans and Cambodians. Further research could answer questions of the long-term impact of mass violence on collective identity beyond what immediately meets the eye, to more subtle nuances and insidious patterns to develop a more well-rounded theory of collective identity.

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