

By fire and by stone

By Michał Wojnarowicz

Middle aged woman, with a characteristic hat – usually it is a jewelry box or a small case full with precious gems. She wears black clothes and with two fingers of her right hand she is pinching end of her right ear. With the left hand she is holding a large black dog.

Or...

Woman with two faces, wearing black clothes. In left hand she holds a book, in right a pen.

vs.

Old lady with a garland made of Mandagora on her head. In her left hand we can see a twig from a juniper. And with the right hand she holds a tied wildcat.

...

Ok, you are probably wondering what the hell I'm talking about.

I found the descriptions above in the "Iconologia" by Cesare Ripa. As we can read on Wikipedia he "was an Italian aesthetician who worked for Cardinal Anton Maria Salviati as a cook and butler". He was also the author of mentioned book. It is a set of allegories of various aspects of human life and culture. Most of them are complemented with the prints. Those allegories are highly symbolic, based mostly on ancient Roman-Greek tradition. Every small details has its own meaning - which hand holds what, what trait is represented by a particular animal a so on, so on.

Unfortunately, the allegories above came without any prints. My sketching skills are terrible (or maybe my sketches look like modern art – who knows) so I won't dare to draw anything. You have to use your imagination (or draw it and send it to me).

I think it's time to introduce our allegories.

The lady (or ladies) in black is called Remembrance.

The old lady's name is Oblivion.

A huge part of our lives is a struggle between those two ladies. It is impossible to remember everything that happened to us during the day, week, or whole existence - human mind has its limitations. And second of all – why should it remember everything? There is no need for that. All the efforts should be put in remembering and preserving moments that are dear to us. But still, we

won't escape from the darker sides of our memory – pictures of failures, traumas, sorrow. It is really hard to apply categories of right and wrong to our memory. We remember and forget both sides. Always.

If we look to this problem from a perspective of society we will see that the every creation of human culture is bonded with preserving the memory. Script, architecture, photography – almost every invention is meant to save something from disappearing. For all our ideas, for philosophy, for religion it is necessary to express it in the physical form. It might be book, monument or song . But it doesn't assure that anything will last. Man, besides the art of creation, has mastered the art of destruction. Fire kills paper. EMP erases data. Bullet silences the witness.

The Oblivion and the Remembrance are fighting each other.

I would like to show you a glimpse of this struggle. Something that is happening right before my eyes and makes me feel like a spectator during a boxer round.

We have already met the opponents.

But every fair fight need a judge, don't you think? Fortunately, I found the print.



Tall, pale woman in black clothes with hollow eyes, uncovered muscles and bones. Sometimes she is presented with a scythe, flaming sword or a hook.

Death.

Who would fit better to solve quarrel between the Remembrance and the Oblivion?

Death is a key moment. If something or somebody cease to exist, the memory is the only thing what's left. It only depends on us if it outlast or fade away.

Now, we need a proper arena for the struggle. The place where all the three ladies meet.

בית קברות

цвинтар

Ein Friedhof

Cmentarz

Why cemetery?

Because it is a place of transition that belongs to two worlds. On one hand, that is the place the people dear to us remain. To remember us that they are still with us but maybe in different (better?) place. And that they are still part of our lives.

On the other hand it is a place of certain meaning. It is a separate place – there is a reason why in most cultures people don't bury the death next to the homes. This separation and the ritual, that is bonded with it, gives us a clear signal – they are gone and won't get back. Maybe (if you believe) you will meet them in afterlife. But still cemetery remains for us some sort of gate – a clear border between life and death. We bury dead one and then we go home. And move on.

We both want to be with them and be without them.

Remembrance and Oblivion.

Let's meet them.

(Just one more thing to explain. Why did I choose to compare two Jewish cemeteries? For purely personal reasons – I like Jews. Don't get me wrong, it doesn't mean that I dislike other nations (well, maybe besides Philistines), but with my "liking" comes certain approach and knowledge. It's easier for me to write about this subject in that perspective).

As you have already noticed, it will be a rather personal, a little bit incoherent, maybe over intellectualized essay, served in English that seriously need an improvement. If I didn't dissuade you till this point... Well – enjoy the rest.

I.

After you will pass restaurant "The Devil's Horn" (the best one in Błonie) you have to turn right. After 30 meters right again, into the dirt road. Don't wear white shoes – black gravel on the road will definitely dirt them.

Far on right your will see a church, you will reach it after 3-4 minutes. It belongs to a Mariavite Church – a small community that emerged from Catholic Church at the beginning of previous century. Next to the building the small cemetery is located. I used to visit this place quite often when I was younger, but I will get to this part later. We still marching up the road.

I must tell you that the surroundings changed a lot. My earliest memories of this place is a giant (for a kid) grey solid of the church in the middle of nowhere. Maybe not exactly nowhere – it was a empty field with nothing but tall grass and weeds. In polish I would call it "nieużytki". It looked really depressing, especially in cold and rainy autumn.

But now it is different. Many houses were build in recent years along the road and next to it. There are still some empty yards, but it is a matter of time, when someone will start a construction (I passed 3 new house being built during my walk). You need 5 more minutes to get to the destination point – Old Jewish Cemetery in Błonie.







I won't provide you with any compelling details about the live of Jewish community in my hometown. The community started to grow in the second half of XIX century. Just before the outbreak of WWII Jewish population reached 3.5 thousands – 40% of town citizens. Jews from Błonie were active in crafts and trade. Shops, workshops, *bet Kneset*, bath, Zionist organizations and the religious ones. Typical small Jewish community in typical small polish town. And typical fate.

Germans captured Błonie on 17 September 1939. First came the murders, pillages and executions. After that - creation of ghetto and use of slave labor. In the February 1941 local ghetto was liquidated and Jews from Błonie were sent to Warsaw Ghetto and then to death camp in Treblinka. Only few survived – hided by friends or sometimes by complete strangers (also the cemetery was a hideout).

The Jewish community in Błonie was never restored after the war. The cemetery is all that's left.

Not much as you can see on pictures below.







Pillars that was presumably the entrance. Few standing tombstones, with still visible letters. The rest lays broken in the high grass. And beneath the surface lay those who are gone. Efraim Ifszel son of Avraham Meir Kanaster. Rabin Jehuda ben Josef. Jakow X (the last name is obliterated). That what letters show us. Or maybe there is no one there. After the war exhumations were conducted and several bodies were moved. The soil here is moist, decay proceed rather quickly. Maybe the stones are all that is left. But as I mentioned before, many new houses are built just next to the cemetery. What will happen if by accident (or "by accident") the remains of cemetery would by damaged? There is no document, no witnesses, no information that could help to restore this place. Just stones among grass.

I visited the cemetery at the end of October. The weather was perfect, after many rainy days the sun finally showed up. The air was crisp. I hoped to stumble across on someone who live next to the cemetery. I didn't want to interview he or she. I didn't prepare any questions, except of one – does it have any meaning for you to live next this place of memory?

I was lucky that day.

First I caught up with some boy (few years younger than me) that was going back from school. I asked him the question above.

"Yes – he answered – it is important for me"

He explained me that, he has some Jewish roots, however his ancestors didn't live here. His family is from Warsaw. We talked a little bit about the cemetery.

"For me it its important, but you should talk to me brother – he knows a lot about cemetery and its history".

Shame that brother wasn't around and I lacked the time to set up meeting. We didn't talk more than 3 minutes but I was certain that the boy wasn't exaggerating anything. Even without any personal and direct bond with this cemetery, he feels some sort of connection. Thanks to his roots, thanks to the place he is living, the thin thread have been established. Is it enough?

I thanked him and went further. I was lucky again - in front of the house just next to the cemetery two men were talking. I wanted to take some pictures from distance. I didn't even managed to take a single shoot, when I heard "How can I help you"?

The one who asked me that question had a face and hands of hardworking man. I would said he was in a middle 40', short grey hair. I stepped closer and explained myself. We started talking. The other guy didn't participate. He lived in this house right in front of the cemetery's gate. His precaution was justified – there were some incidents of vandalism at the cemetery in the past. Police asked all the local residents to pay attention for people who appears here, wandering, taking pictures. In conclusion – people like me.

I asked him the same question I asked previously.

"Yes it has a meaning. I like this place. I get used to living here and I feel good with the atmosphere of this place."

Does the city council somehow helps in preserving the object?

“Not really, no. Maybe if somebody important was buried here, they would find some money, to commemorate him. Or maybe some Jews might send some funds. At least the city could erect some kind of memento. Somehow commemorate”.

“You see – he carries on – it looked completely different back in the days. The whole area was fenced. There was a watchman that took care for tombstones. Look here – he shows me the field – there was a big garden over here. The road was ending near the river, people had been going to beach there. But after the war, You know, nothings was left.

I asked him about the people who visit the cemetery. Maybe some members of Jewish community of Warsaw come here on a regular basis?

“Not them, but some people come here. They light the cemetery candles”.

“They should set stones on tombstones – I said – That’s how Jews do it in their tradition”.

“Yeah they do it too, they light the cemetery candles and set stones. Usually after All Saints Day. Those stones still lay there”.

He was right. They were still there.



Two days later visited the Jewish Cemetery on Okopowa Street. One of the biggest in Europe. Established over 200 years ago. Almost 200 thousands graves located on almost 33 hectares surrounded with red-brick wall. Cemetery survived the WWII and it is used by Jewish community in Warsaw.



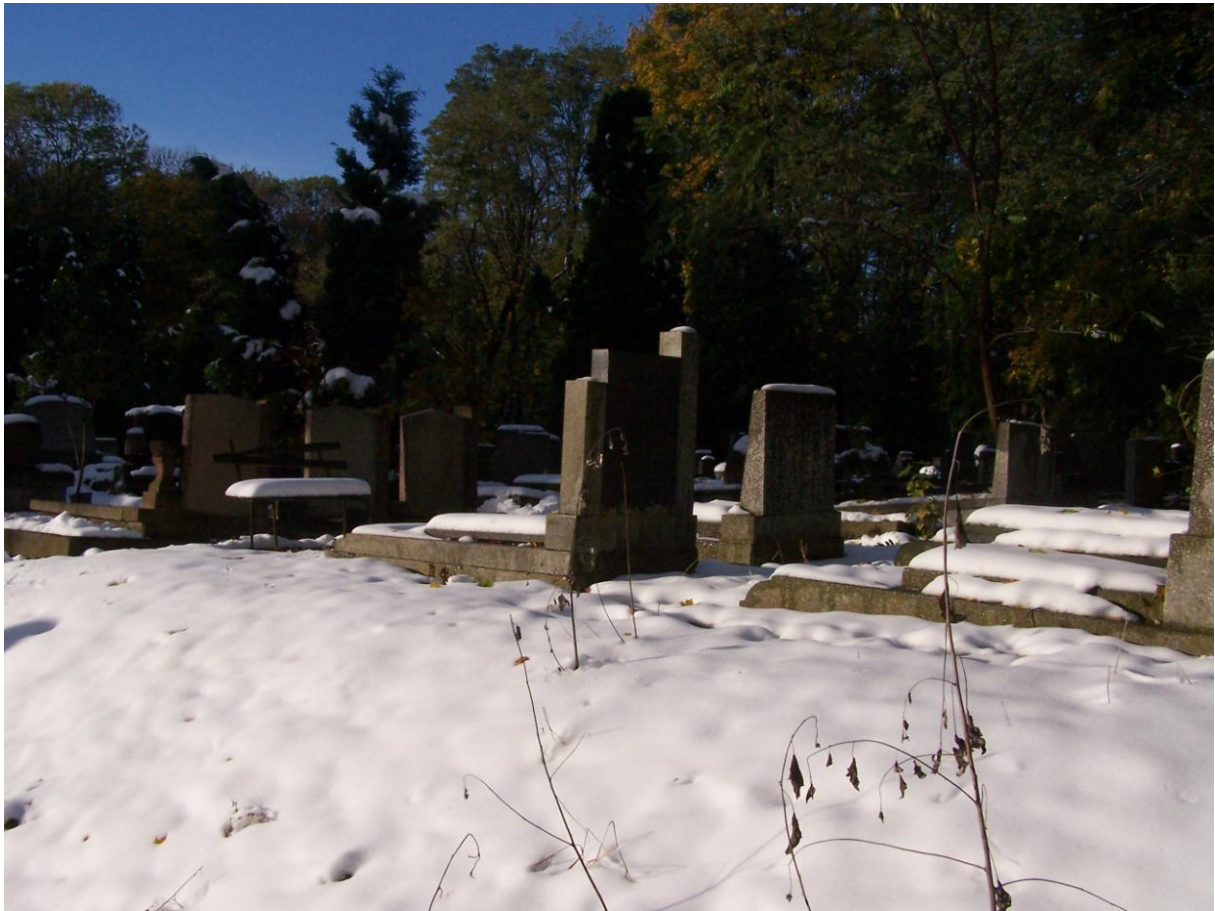
You can walk here for hours. I recall my impression first time I had been there – the jungle. Full of gnarled trees, high bushes, bird's voices. And the giant mass of grey stone. It is both overwhelming and inviting. And really hard to describe and express with words so by any occasion, come here, and see it for yourself.





It wasn't the best day for me to visit the Cemetery. I was tired, I was hungry and, to be honest, my mind was far, far away. But now when I am writing these words it occurs to me that even if I were well rested and fully focused I wouldn't experience more. Well, maybe I wouldn't freeze so much.





As you can see on the photos, the cemetery was covered in snow (in just one day whole country was transformed into northern Greenland. Welcome to Poland). I wandered for some between the tombstones. Only the relatively new graves are situated in open space – the rest of cemetery runs through the trees. There is a section for orthodox and for secular, for children, for victims of Warsaw Ghetto. The list of people buried here is a cross section of the Jewish community in Poland. Rabbis, politicians, activists, artists and common people. Secular tombstones with polish letters and beautiful ohels of *cadikim*. Symbolic graves and a special place to bury Torah scrolls. 200 thousands mementos of people who lived here.



First I wanted to accost somebody and asked her or him about importance of this place. During my walk I spotted two, maybe three pairs. From the distance I saw them taking pictures. Pretty much just like me. I heard laughter. Somehow I felt, that I won't hear anything exceptional from them. They just went for a walk to climatic place during winter with their camera. Maybe I was wrong.



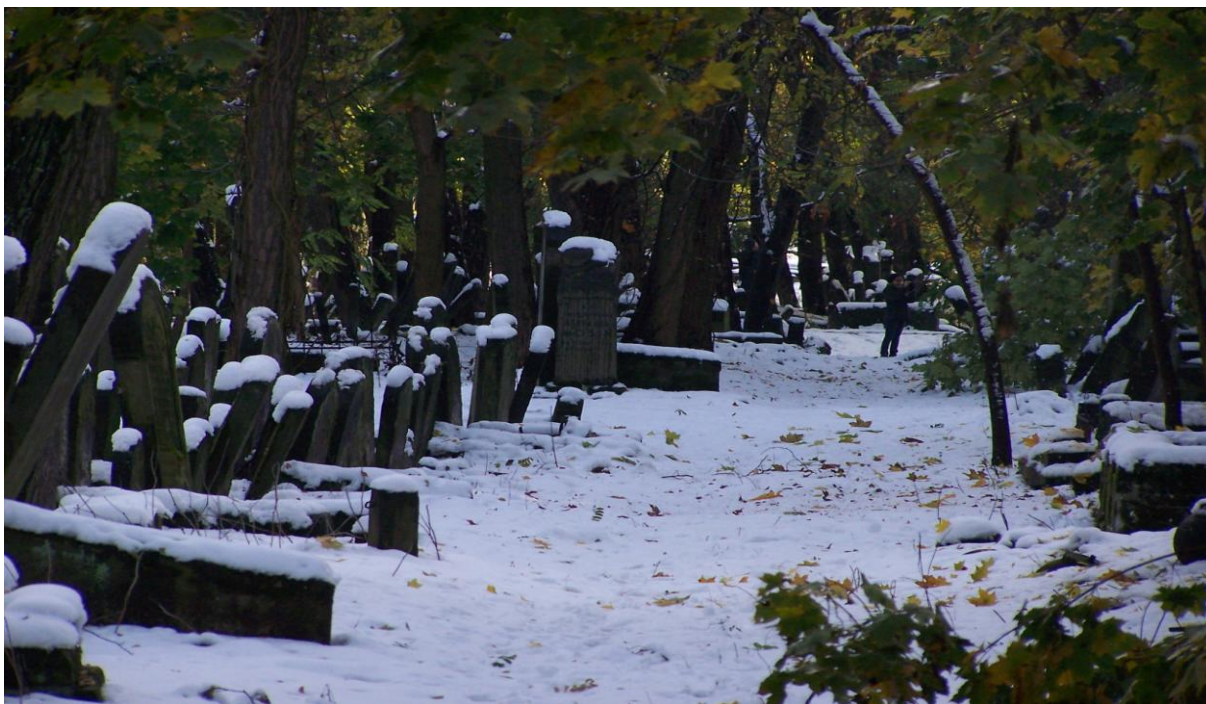
Before I left the cemetery I had asked the man in the ticket counter how many people visit it?

"A lot of people come here" – he said

"Mostly who?"

"Tourists. Organized trips from Israel. Lots of them".

I thanked him and went to the exit.



III

What is the biggest difference between the cemeteries I visited? The answer seems obvious. The area, the history, the present state etc, etc. If I were a poet I would write about cemetery that lives and the one that remain dead. But that would be just too pretentious. Just like my original title for this essay – the Big and the Forsaken. After my visits I could easily write – the Small and the Forsaken. Thousands of tombstones in Warsaw and a few laying in Błonie, they send similar message. They are forgotten.

You might disagree. They stand (or lay) and they exist. They are evidence that thousands of people lived here. The memory is preserved.

Is it?

Because of Holocaust millions of people were simply extracted from the world. A void was created. The void which absorbed everything and by that – affected everything. It changed the meanings, changed the way of thinking, reversed the perspective.

These two cemeteries became symbols for themselves. What they represent isn't not memory but, in fact, the concept of preserving. The remembrance of the place, not of people. Yes, they exist. But now, they stand for people who died. Not for people who lived.

I think that when it comes to remembrance we can't simply acknowledge fact of someone's existence (and the end of it). That's just commemoration. The true remembrance must relate to the way she or he lived her or his life. Not just who they were but what kind of people they were. What they liked? What they hated? How they spent their lives? Would we want to be like them?

Unfortunately those memories are available only for small group of people – family and closest friends (it differs when we are talking about famous persons and we can buy their biographies

written by historians, psychiatrists, ex wives etc). Only few can say – “I really know this man”. And when the war takes lives of those people – what next? Remembrance slipped through our hands.

Maybe its natural. Maybe, only the great history will be remembered and lives of common people will fade like an old photograph. Generation after generation. In the end – what do we really know about our grand-grand-grandparents? If they weren’t historic figures, we presumably won’t know anything. Like the man in Błonie said – maybe if somebody important were buried here... But then we’ve got hundreds of important people buried at Okopowa. So what?

Or maybe there’s no such thing like true remembrance. I’m just talking nonsense.

Maybe all we need is the feeling that I’ve seen when I went to cemetery in Błonie. “I like this place”. Likeliness. Not love, not attachment. Likeliness. I know I could at this moment write something about our facebook generation, the concept of “like button”, but I won’t.

Maybe that’s what the remembrance is all about. The place we visit because it’s a great place to take a picture. The place we somehow guard (when a suspicious looking guy with camera shows up). Where the tours come. When the relatives and friends disappear it is up to random strangers to maintain “fire” that burns on our past and future graves. Or maintain something better than fire.

After I had learnt much about Jewish culture, I understood (I think I understood) and adapted one particular aspect of it. At this point I am convinced – this way fits me better. I am talking about ways of remembrance the death – lighting candles in Polish tradition on graves and setting on stones in Jewish tradition.

Fire, because of its nature, sooner or later will go off. Stone will remain in one place. You need to use force to move it. If the stone is light, it’s not a problem, but still you must put some effort to do that. If nothing disturb it, the stone will lay there for many, many years. As symbol of never ending memory. A solid thought.

Fancy metaphor, isn’t it? I feel, it’s the most important thing I wanted to say. Beat Oblivion with a stone.



I went to the cemetery by the Mariavite's church. Besides some of my distant ancestors, one of my closest relatives was buried there. My uncle, who lived in our house, died when I was 13. Proper age for first encounter of death if you ask me. You are old enough to understand the meaning, the "finality" of what happened. And still you are young enough to just move on after few days.

He wasn't a happy man, after years I see it clearly. We wouldn't get along now, I am sure of it.

And I could write many more things about him. But I won't.

I liked him. And all I can do now is to set a stone. To remember.

Those are the thoughts that were going round my head, when I immersed myself in this topic. I honestly tried to put them into some order, try to connect them and build some kind of logical structure. And still I am sure it isn't as for you clear as it for me. In a way, I wanted by this text not only express my reflections, but somehow (by providing you some information and perspective) trigger yours. After all, you don't have to understand me – you just have to feel me.