

Memory about the Others in Postwar Pidzamche: Between Anonymity and Emotional Ties

I. Introduction

Between the years 1939 and 1946 modern-day Lviv was located on the “bloodlands” [Snyder] – territory which experienced terrible destruction and suffering because of WWII and totalitarian politics of Nazi and Soviet regimes. During this period of time thousands of city inhabitants lost their lives, many of them had to flee and never came back, and almost everyone who survived in the city during the Soviet and Nazi occupations lost close friends and relatives. According to the 1931 census there were 312 thousand people who lived in Lviv (of them over 157 thousand were Roman Catholic, 99 thousand were Jewish, and 49 thousand were Greek Catholic). In 1944 there were only 154 thousand inhabitants, and in 1959 city population grew to 410 thousand [Bodnar 2010, 310], mainly because of Soviet politics of transmigration. In less than twenty years after the breakdown of WWII, city ethnic composition went through radical changes. For example, Poles constituted 62.8 percent of Lviv population in 1944, however, by January 1955 – they were only 2.3 per cent [Susak, 80], and according to 1959 census 60.2 percent of city inhabitants reported to be Ukrainians and 27.1 per cent were Russians [Bodnar 2010, 312]. The war utterly changed the face of the city – people from all over Ukraine and Soviet Union moved into the old buildings. They become the “new society of the old city” [Bodnar 2012, 15].

In late July, 1944, Lviv was retaken by Soviet troops and along with the territory of Western Ukraine it became a part of Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Depopulated with the war, city was a field where government attempted to create soviet community with new common history and culture. Demolishing memories about previous inhabitants was one of the instruments of this policy. Bodnar (2010) mentions that starting from mid-1950’s Lviv was turning into a Ukrainian city due to intensive migration of the village inhabitants from the West-Ukrainian region. Difficult living conditions and hard work in the factories did not leave time to dig into history – Soviet society had to build communist future, but people were preoccupied with present-day problems, and this frame did not give space for past. Risch (2011) provided very bright example of encounter in “Inturist” hotel between Polish-Canadian tourist and young female employee, and she said that Lviv before the war had been Ukrainian and always had been Ukrainian city [Risch, 27]. That young female showed that state historic policy could be effective.

However, there were some differences between official representation of the past and personal memories about it. Lviv became a new home for many people, and their strategies and practices of creation of collective or individual senses of “belonging” were extremely varied, from conquering private and public spaces to constant living among ghosts of the past, from total separation from pre-war residents and their culture to attempts to preserve unique atmosphere of the city. We intended to understand these complicated processes on the example of one of the oldest and the most industrialized Lviv districts, Pidzamche.

II. Methodological Note

Study of Pidzamche was conducted on the crossroads of various research perspectives. It has historical, sociological, anthropological, and urban components. “«Searching for Home» in Postwar Lviv: The Experience of Pidzamche, 1944-1960” research project focused on how different processes, like industrialization, Sovietization, post-war traumatization, and the creation of new political and social norms, have changed this district and created its identity. One of the aims was discovering the ways of developing the feeling of “home” and belonging of new city inhabitants. For this purpose team of sociologists and historians developed methodology of semi-structured in-depth interviews. This research strategy is based on the traditions of oral history as it was described in works of Bornat (2004), Thompson (1978), and Smith (2002), and qualitative sociological semi-structured in-depth interviews (Kvale (2004)). Sample consisted of people who lived at Pidzamche during post-war period. Usually they were children of people who either moved to Pidzamche from other part of Lviv, or who moved to Lviv from other parts of Ukraine or Soviet Union. The interview was built around the blocs of questions about family history, everyday life, relationships with neighbors, education, work, leisure time, general perception of the district (overall, ten clusters of questions) in 1944-1960. There were main questions and additional ones. The field work was conducted during Summer, 2012, and 25 in-depth interviews were collected. Among respondents there were 7 males and 18 females, who were selected with the help of purposive and snow-ball sample. Average length of the interview was one hour.

Research was conducted under the program “Historical Workshop Europe,” financed by the German Federal Fund “Memory, Responsibility, Future,” and coordinated by the Institute of Applied History in Frankfurt-on-Oder and the European University Viadrina, as well as the Center of European Studies (Lund, Sweden) together with the Center for Urban History of East Central Europe (Lviv, Ukraine), and in cooperation with the museum “Territory of Terror” (Lviv, Ukraine).

During the quest for “memory about the Others,” we defined possible methodological pitfalls and issues one has to take into account while doing oral history in general and oral history of Lviv particularly. Therefore, we outlined such matters:

1) Talking about the past from the present point of view. People create their narratives at the exact point of time as answer to concrete question, so there is usually a long period of time between them and event they are talking about. They organize past experiences according to the system of values they have now, and it might be different from the one they had before. What was important after WWII now lost its value and vice versa. It could be a possible reason of stressing some aspects of the story and leveling the other. Also interview is a result of interaction of two persons – interviewee and interviewer – and its quality largely depends on the development of this interaction.

2) Differences between knowing (knowing-about) and remembering (living-through). It is important to make a division between people who can remember and people who know something from the words of others. Both these types of memory are essential for creating a holistic view of the situation, but by distinguishing them researcher can see how some ideas became part of collective memory and / or urban legends. For example, there are two quotes from the interviews. First one belongs to woman who was born in 1946, so she cannot remember the WWII, but she is very certain about the events in the city at that time: *“Well, the Germans have been met here in Lviv with bread and salt. You also do not know that? But I know. Well, in short, as before, and now*

were... well, how to say, traitors” (female, 1946, 12-7-2012)¹. The other quote goes from woman who actually remembers horrific moments of the war: “In 1939 I only experienced grief: Russians came, and brought nothing. And in 1941st those executioners came. Executioners came and that’s all... I came home, I could not speak. «Where have you been? Where have you been?» – My mother asked. I said: “I saw how people were murdered” (female, 1935, 17-7-2012).

3) Sensual (personal) and eventual (collective) memory. Memory of colors, smells, sounds, and touches is grounded into concrete situation. It is very personal and cannot be shared by others, while remembering events could be more abstract and as part of general information it can belong to a group of people. The quote of woman, who lived at Rohatka (a nick-name for the part of Pidzamche district), could be a good example of sensual memory from the childhood about the smell of the stairs: “Oh, and [they] washed stairs, even rubbed them up with paste. In our house, on Rohatka, there were wooden stairs. They were rubbed up with paste. Later I felt this scent only in the library, you know, at the Market Square, or Zelena Street, as you come to the old library, the stairs are rubbed with paste” (female, 1949, 31-7-2012). Sensual memory is usually more “deep” and it adds a personal dimension to the general frame of the events.

III. Contexts for Memory about the Others

Thematic analysis of the texts of interviews revealed a number of contexts in which people talk about interethnic relations and history of their new homes. Further study is devoted to the discussion around emerged themes from the conversations with Pidzamche inhabitants.

Context 1. Empty houses in Lviv. One of the types of people’s relationships with places, empirically examined by Lewicka (2011), is so called “placelessness” which meant indifference and no need to create emotional bonds with places. This type could be illustrated with the quotes from the interviews, when people talk about Lviv empty houses as about something obvious and ordinary: “And it was just an empty during the war. All apartments were empty. Only people settled” (female, 1946, 25-7-2012). Such attitude could be an example of complete anonymity of the space, which is not related to somebody. The other opinion about empty houses is more detailed. In this case interviewees knew about previous inhabitants and their fate, but with no relation to concrete people who lived in their apartments: “Well, it started already during the occupation by the Germans because many Jews lived there [at Pidzamche – N.O.]. [They were] Evicted, there were empty apartments” (male, 1929, 4-7-2012); “And here the Poles left and there were a lot of empty houses. There, where my mother lived, I remember, [they] came and there was an empty house, completely empty. They washed [it], scraped, whitewashed and there we began to live” (female, 1946, 12-7-2012). These two quotes showed that even with well-established Soviet “politics of forgetting” Pidzamche inhabitants preserved memory about Poles and Jews who lived there before the WWII. However, this information might not be expressed during Soviet time, and could be a result of discoveries made during last 23 years of Ukrainian independence.

¹ Gender of interviewee, year born, date of the interview (day-month-year). According to the policy of confidentiality, only information about gender and age of participants will be provided. All interviews from the collection are preserved in the “UStories” oral history archive of the Center for Urban History of East Central Europe. As interviews were conducted in Ukrainian or Russian, author translated all quotes.

So, while talking about “empty houses” Pidzamche inhabitants sometimes use the strategy of emotional separation and recall either abstract people or general “Poles” or “Jews” with no names and stories behind them. And they don’t know who exactly lived in their apartments before.

Context 2. Someone’s Space. Stories about previous inhabitants usually were told in private, because they contradicted Soviet narratives about “common Russian-Ukrainian past” in which there was no place for Others. In the atmosphere of fear and total distrust that prevailed in the post-war Lviv people did not ask too much. However, some stories were preserved in families, like the one from the quote of woman, whose parents moved to the city after WWII: *“Then someone mentioned... that there were many free apartments in Lviv, that Poles were leaving, and you could find some kind of a flat. And they [interviewee’s parents – N.O.] came here with their son in 1946. But in 1946, it was already a little late. Because the apartments were released in 1944, I think so... Later they saw an ad «Sell Firewood». It was a signal that someone was selling apartment”* (female, 1949, 4-7-12). So, her parents bought (and she stressed it: bought) a flat from Polish man who was about to leave Lviv. However, parents were not the only transmitters of memories about other Lvivians. There were people who survived during the war and stayed in the city – living witnesses, who remembered interwar period and preserved atmosphere of European city. Usually they were old ladies who served as housekeepers [Bodnar 2012]. One of interviewee recalled such woman in her narration: *“And one Polish woman, she lived long, long time. I still remember we had a little conversation, she told me that here all this house belonged to one owner. All three floors. And there, in the yard, in this side [annex], maid lived there”* (male, 1949, 19-7-12). We do not know the details of that conversation between young man and old lady, but it was one of the ways to link new inhabitants with old ones. So, Lviv citizens find out information about previous dwellers from old people [Bodnar 2012, 16], but these might be semi-legendary stories with very few details like names, ethnicity, or occupation.

Sometimes information is not transferred through direct witnesses. The built environment helped people to make discoveries personally: *“How do I know that it was a Jewish apartment? Because they have at the door, you know, the Jews, when they go into the room, they kissed. It was like those thermometers outdoors”* (female, 1935, 17-7-12). In this case woman tries to explain artifacts from other culture with the help of something familiar from her everyday life. Both is this case and when interviewees remember conversations with relatives or neighbors it is possible connect house with concrete people, who lived there. Even without names they are real people from the past with their own stories.

Context 3. Unique Objects. Postwar life in the city was complicated and dangerous. There were problems with food supply and everyday necessities. After the years of war some buildings were destroyed either fully or partly and in this atmosphere there were signs of other life: *“But it was such furniture, you know; now it would be antiques. Well, but in time of war it was cold, there was no gas, so we burned it all”* (female, 1935, 17-7-12), *“And no, there was one Polish sideboard. It was probably not even Polish, but Austrian. Very old work, very original ... I'm so sorry that it was sold”* (male, 1949, 19-7-12). In both cases interviewees were very upset because of the loss of these things with big aesthetic value. They were forced to sell them or destroy to survive during first postwar years. However, even after the half of a century interviewees remember about those things.

In the interviews Pidzamche inhabitants described their everyday life after the WWII in very ascetic way – they had minimum things and simple furniture. However, the exceptions from this

poverty were old things, left by people, who lived in the city before: “*They [Poles] left the piano and left a commode. Commode was very fashionable, [with] such drawers for underwear and bed clothes*” (female, 1938, 6-8-12). These things were unique, and people spoke about them with deep emotional feelings. As Bodnar (2012) quotes one of her interviews with migrants, the old furniture and preserved pre-war interiors created “*atmosphere of some other world*” [Bodnar 2012, 16].

Context 4. Helping and Empathy. Pidzamche inhabitants remembered diverse cases of interactions between people from different ethnic groups. They stressed that during and right after the WWII people were better and helped each other. When talking about their family history, they recalled situations of mutual empathy: “*The war began; just my mother bore me here. I know, my mother told me, that bore me here in this house, a midwife helped her to give birth, and then Germans were looking for the midwife, because she was Jewish. Mom hid her, well, and so*” (female, 1942, 9-7-12); “*And when Poles have left and Jews were taken, and then, I do not know whether he left in 1944, it was his house. And he said, «Go, here there is a place», he said, «here you will have more space, you have children». We had four children, and so we have lived [there]*” (female, 1936, 25-7-12). Polish man from the second story also adopted old lady who at that time had no family, because her sons died at the war. He asked the interviewee’s parents to look after her. They agreed and that lady was like a “grandmother” for the family.

We can assume that people better remember (and say out loud) “good” examples of interethnic relations from the past. Bodnar (2010) reached the similar conclusion. She stated that migrants from the villages testified about the absence of substantial national controversy in Soviet Lviv. Risch (2011) also provided number of examples that nationality did not matter [Risch, 55]. However, despite of the policy of ethnic and social equality propagated by the state, the national differences in the city still were noticeable. The next three contexts below illustrate situations of postwar interaction with others, for interviewed Pidzamche inhabitants (mainly Ukrainians and Russians) were Poles and Jews.

Context 5. Language and Communication. Previous inhabitants were not the only Others mentioned by interviewed people. When talking about their everyday life, Pidzamche inhabitants also recalled people with whom they share public (and semi-public, like balconies and staircases, and sometimes even private) spaces and who were representatives of different ethnic groups: “*There were four apartments on the balcony, right? You could go into every house, and it did not matter if there was Jew, or Ukrainian, or Pole – all lived together. All spoke in their own language and no one was insulted*” (female, 1935, 17-7-12). Usually interviewees talk about communication with Others in very positive way – language was not a problem for them. The lack of national differences Bodnar’s informants explained with the results of state policy when “*from 1940 all lived under Soviet rule, all mixed and people of different nationalities get used to each other*” [Bodnar 2010, 315]. Often workers spoke Ukrainian and Russian languages equally, Russian at work and Ukrainian at home. They argue that the possession of two languages was a big positive at that time [Bodnar 2010, 326]. Some older people also can speak Polish and German.

Communication also was different. With some neighbors one may only greeted and treated them with caution, others were his close friends: “*These were so called Saturday gatherings. They came to us, these neighbors, these Gershman family, we mostly communicate with them, because they were very communicable, very literate. And we played lotto, [drank] dry wine, [ate] fruits, if*

there were grapes, apples” (male, 1949, 19-7-12). So, it was not a question of nationality but interpersonal relations.

Context 6. Holidays and Celebrations. One of the most striking examples of idealization of interethnic relations is referring to non-problematic contexts, like celebrations of holidays. Pidzamche inhabitants recalled situations from their childhood, when people respected traditions of others and shared their festive moods: *“As my mother said, «I celebrate Easter both Russian and Ukrainian». We celebrated all holidays. And Polish holidays. We just lived in the same house, Poles, and Ukrainians, and Russians, right?... See, if we had such holidays, so we knew that you cannot wash anything and hang outside... Now no one cares about it. Now they wash every day”* (female, 1949, 10-7-12); *“And there were invitations to the holidays, Polish, Ukrainian. And on Jewish [holiday] [they] brought us matzo. Yes, it was like this. You know, it was a kind of unity”* (female, 1936, 25-7-12). These two quotes from women, who were born before and after the WWII, showed that tradition of common celebrations was not interrupted and continued to exist during Soviet times, yet when it was not supported and even persecuted by the regime. However, it might be also an example of simplification (because the joint celebration did not necessarily imply deep exploring of another culture) and admiration of previous times with constant comparing to contemporary situation.

Context 7. Everyday Life and Cuisine. Surprisingly, the most common context, in which interviewed people talk about the Others, was cuisine. It might be an example of a strategy, when the other culture is consumed in very simple way and is not perceived as a threat to someone’s identity. Otherwise, cuisine is daily activity with no usual boundaries. As people from different ethnic groups lived together, they learned from each other: *“I loved tomato soup. It is cooked with rice or macaroni. It is Polish, it is their. Polish dish. And so. We learned from each other”* (female, 1946, 17-8-12); *“Since my mother was from Russia, we had Russian cuisine. And Ukraine is here... and here is Ukrainian cuisine, and Polish. Here, in our house, Poles lived. So, we knew all cuisines, [we] learned”* (female, 1949, 10-7-12). Some dishes were perceived as traditional for ethnic communities and were associated with them, like Polish tomato soup or Ukrainian borshch. Also recalling of cuisine is part of sensual memory, because it involves the memory of the taste. Finally, people willingly speak about food, because in common sense this issue does not apply to “big history” (Pidzamche inhabitants sometimes refused to talk because they were afraid that they are ignorant or the topic would imply political questions) and is close to them.

Sometimes eating activities were perceived as strange and it took a little time to get used to them. For Lvivians the most unusual was primarily Russian cuisine, because before the war there were almost no Russians in the city: *“Then I saw for the first time how they [Russian soldiers] ate tiny fish, sprat, I could not understand how they ate it with the heads, with the bones. They somehow put it on the bread and ate... And later I saw that people ate” [fish] in this way”* (male, 1929, 4-7-12). However, after WWII Russians became second large ethnic group (after Ukrainians) in the city and their cuisine enriches the cookbooks of Lviv inhabitants.

IV. Conclusions and Discussion

Soviet politics of memory created an image of Lviv as industrial Ukrainian city. However, the holistic official representation of the past was confronted with multiple different experiences and personal memories. Lviv as a new home for people from all over Ukraine and Soviet Union

somehow managed to preserved stories about people, who lived there before the war. During our quest for the “memory about the Others” we intended to discover the relation to the city multiethnic past on the example of one of the oldest city districts. Now it is possible to outline some very preliminary conclusions based on the interviews with Pidzamche inhabitants, which might be a prospect for further research. First of all, as it is mentioned in the topic of this paper, memory about the Others underlies somewhere between anonymity and emotional ties. When talking about postwar city and empty buildings, people refer either to nobody’s apartments which were left by nameless individuals or to houses or things with stories related to concrete persons. Also family histories carefully preserved cases of empathy and mutual helping during hard times. These stories opposed dominant historic narrative and created an alternative vision of the past.

Furthermore Pidzamche inhabitants have different relations to different Others: the people who lived in the city before (Others-from-the-Past) and neighbors, colleagues, and friends of various nationalities and religious beliefs (Others-nearby). Others-from-the-Past are semi-legendary, because contemporary citizens have not personally experienced interaction with them and know about these people from the stories told in private during Soviet time and now revealed publicly. In addition Others-nearby belong to daily life of interviewees. They are part of personal memories, and people can recall concrete situations of communication. Finally, the interviews showed the tendency of idealization of interethnic relations in not problematic contexts (like leisure time, holidays, or cuisine). However, these conclusions are limited in space (Pidzamche) and time (post-war period) and need further confirmation of the other set of data.

“«Searching for Home» in Postwar Lviv: The Experience of Pidzamche, 1944-1960” study provided us with materials, which go far beyond the topic of this paper. They contribute to oral history of post-war Lviv and hopefully will help future researchers to recreate the picture of the past from human perspective.

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