

Poland, Europe and Forgiveness as a Political Strategy after World War II

By Karolina Wigura

The July heat of 1946

“Kielce – July 4th, 1946” read the title of an article by Polish historian Krystyna Kersten, published in the 38th issue of *Tygodnik Solidarność* on December 4th, 1981¹.

Kersten depicted the first few days of July 1946 in post-war Kielce, one of the larger towns in southern Poland. A few days before the events described by her, on June 30th, a referendum was held, in which 10 million Poles, the majority of people entitled to vote, demonstrated their negative attitude towards the newly installed communist authorities in Warsaw. In the tense atmosphere, which after the referendum prevailed all over the country, a bloody pogrom of the Jewish inhabitants of Kielce occurred. The official propaganda spoke of “a provocation by reactionary elements” and claimed that among the angry mob members of the anti-communist (in the wording of the propaganda: fascist) Anders’ Army were to be seen. Historians know today that there was a grain of truth in this statement: it was indeed a provocation, only its authors were the communist authorities.

In the morning of July 4th, 1946, a boy came back home after a few days of absence. He told his parents that he had been kidnapped and imprisoned in a basement. At the time rumours circulated in town about ritual murders of children committed by Jewish inhabitants, and thus the parents jumped to the conclusion that their son had miraculously escaped from such a deadly trap. The nearest militia unit was informed. On their way to the place pointed out by the boy, the militiamen told people where they went and why. Soon a large crowd gathered around them, shouting slogans against the government, the communist secret service UB and against the Jews.

During the time the militiamen were searching the house, the mob killed the first person. More murders followed, 41 in total, all committed against people identified by the crowd as Jews.

In post-war Poland, of the more than three million people of the Jewish ethno-religious minority, less than 250 thousand people were left. For this reason the pogrom was a true shock, Kersten writes in her article. Even more so because the events in Kielce did not

¹ Krystyna Kersten, „Kielce – 4 lipca 1946”, *Tygodnik Solidarność* No 38, 4th Dec. 1981, pp. 8-9, available at: http://arch.ipn.gov.pl/ftp/sierpien80/czytelnia/tygodnik_solidarnosc/ts36.pdf (opened on July 3rd, 2014).

happen in isolation. In 1945, Kraków, Rzeszów and some smaller towns also became scenes of pogrom riots.

In the weeks and months just after the pogrom much was written about it by renowned sociologists and writers like Stanisław Ossowski or Jerzy Andrzejewski. One of the most important questions was posed by Stefania Skwarczyńska in the catholic, relatively independent *Tygodnik Powszechny*: “Hardly any relief comes from the fact, that the pogrom in Kielce was a result of an external provocation. Is it possible that a sane society is manipulated by external interests?”² But in 1947 a totalitarian regime was imposed in Poland in full strength, and increased censorship made further reflection impossible.

It was only in 1980, after the August Agreements signed between the communist government and the nascent trade union ‘Solidarność’, that censorship was eased enough to allow writing on the subject again. Thus Kersten could finally publish her article officially. After the democratic breakthrough in 1989, the complicated Polish-Jewish relations in the 20th century became one of the most important topics in the discussion on the Polish culture of remembrance.

‘Returning to Europe’ – Poland and the post-war remembrance culture

This transformation did not happen accidentally. It was more a part of a larger process of Europeanisation of Polish remembrance culture. This process was not, as one would perhaps assume, connected very strongly with 2004, the year of Poland’s accession to the European Union. The most important transformation had already started earlier, as symbolical opposition to the communist propaganda before 1989, and then took an even stronger form during the first two decades of the newly regained Polish independence. Thus not the mere fact of joining the EU was the most important factor for the Europeanisation of the Polish remembrance culture, but rather, to use the rhetoric present in Poland before 2004, the dream and the promise of ‘returning to Europe’.

For decades after the Second World War, the language of accounting for the past, repentance and reconciliation formed an important part of European identity. This was tied to a critical approach to the past and a wariness of all ideological blindness. It is the atrocities of World War II that Hannah Arendt referred to as the breaking of the thread of European tradition³ and which Leo Strauss wrote of as bringing humanity to the “brink of an abyss”⁴. In an attempt to escape from the nightmares of totalitarian atrocities, the notions of moral guilt, remorse and the idea of requesting forgiveness were placed at the heart of a newly reforming European identity.

Initially, these ideas were only applied in the context of Germany, a country which, as Dan Diner writes, occupies the central role in 20th century history⁵ and is responsible for Auschwitz, its largest death camp. Auschwitz, in turn, is a metonym for *Shoah*⁶, and its concomitant consequences – the most dramatic and far-reaching of the 20th century. It is from this point of view that Tony Judt regards *Shoah* as one of the most significant factors, if not the most significant, in the shaping of the 20th century European identity⁷. The politics of forgiveness played a hugely important role in the defining of the post-war identity of West

² Stefania Skwarczyńska, “In tenebris lux”, *Tygodnik Powszechny* 11.08.1946. Quotation from: „Kielce – 4 lipca 1946”.

³ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York and London 1993, p. 13.

⁴ Leo Strauss, *Progress or Return?* in: *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, Thomas Pangle (ed.), Chicago and London 1989, p. 227.

⁵ Dan Diner, *Cataclysms: a history of the Twentieth Century from Europe’s Edge*, Madison 2008, p. 9.

⁶ Christian Meier, *From Athens to Auschwitz: The Uses of History*, Harvard, 2005, p. 137.

⁷ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*. London, 2005, p. 804.

Germany. Timothy Garton Ash may have been considering a similar idea when he wrote – in the context of the role images played in recording historical events in social consciousness – that the photograph of Willy Brandt falling to his knees at the Warsaw Ghetto memorial in December 1970 was the most significant image in West German history⁸.

With time, a tendency to view the past with a greater contemplation of guilt spread into the rest of Western Europe, and eventually into the other parts of the world. One can point out many significant examples requesting forgiveness and showing remorse in the European post-war history. One of the best preserved examples in collective remembrance – Willy Brandt's kneeling down in Warsaw – was already mentioned above. But others should be mentioned too: the famous handshake between French president Charles de Gaulle and German chancellor Konrad Adenauer in 1963 and a series of apologies: Queen Elizabeth II to the Maori people, Australia to the stolen Aboriginal children, the Canadian government to the Canadian Indians and Ukrainians. Indeed, the second half of the 20th century can be described as “the Age of Apology”⁹.

After 1989 a proliferation of public apologies referring to the past has also occurred in Polish politics. But as the Europeanisation of Polish remembrance culture started already before 1989, in the following paragraphs three political declarations of remorse and forgiveness will be described: the ‘Polish Bishops’ Appeal to Their German Colleagues’ of 1965, the apology for the Jedwabne pogrom of 2001 and the declaration of mutual forgiveness between Poles and the Ukrainians in Pawłokoma of 2005. These three declarations are representative for the three most important discussions about the past in post-war Poland: Polish-German, Polish-Jewish and Polish-Ukrainian relations.

“We will have to pay for this” – German-Polish reconciliation

The ‘Polish Bishops’ Appeal to Their German Colleagues’ of 18 November 1965 was one of the fifty-six letters written by the Polish Episcopate to episcopates all over the world on the occasion of the end of the Second Vatican Council. This one, however, had a special character, symbolised by the famous words contained at its end, “we grant forgiveness and we ask your forgiveness”¹⁰. Twenty years after the end of World War II, in a communist Poland, where being anti-German (more precisely being anti-Western German) was an inherent feature of the official propaganda of the state, the Polish bishops undertook to write an alternative history of relations with the western neighbour.

As Edith Heller puts it, the situation of Poland following World War II was by no means favourable to establishing friendly relations with the Federal Republic of Germany. By moving Poland to the West, Stalin succeeded in creating a gap between Poland and Germany, based on hostility and lack of trust. The wedge driven between the two states was Poland's western border. The surveillance of the new western border strongly tied Poland to the Soviet Union though such an attachment was already formed by placing Poland within the sphere of Soviet influence¹¹.

‘Appeal’ was written in German throughout several nights during the Second Vatican Council by Archbishop Bolesław Kominek. Kominek, born in 1903, the son of a miner from the Upper

⁸ Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent*. London 1993, p. 298.

⁹ Cf. Roy L. Brooks, *Age of Apology*, in: *When Sorry Isn't Enough. The Controversy over Apologies and Reparations for Human Injustice*, Roy L. Brooks (ed.), New York and London, 1999, p. 3.

¹⁰ All quotations from the *Appeal* come from the following translation: “Polish Bishops’ Appeal to Their German Colleagues”, in “German-Polish Dialogue: Letters of the Polish and German Bishops and International Statements (Bonn: Edition Atlantic-Forum, 1966), 7-19. The quotation above is to be found on page 18.

¹¹ Edith Heller, *Macht Kirche Politik: Der Briefwechsel zwischen den polnischen und deutschen Bischöfen im Jahre 1965* (Cologne 1992, Treff-Punkt), p. 13.

Silesia region, was convinced that the letter would enjoy a favourable reception from the German side. He had already talked with the German bishops during the Second Vatican Council. In addition, a draft of the memorial 'On the Situation of the Expelled and the Attitude of the German Nation to their Neighbours', written by the Council of the Evangelic Church in Germany (EKW), was known at the Vatican. The text was an attempt to take a stand, in a realistic and self-critical manner, on the moral and legal aspects of the Oder-Neisse line. Kominek expected that the answer from the German bishops would be in a similar tone.

But both, he and the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, who was the first to sign the letter, realised how fierce the reaction might be of not only the authorities of the People's Republic of Poland but also Polish society. Hansjakob Stehle quotes statements made by Polish bishops upon signing the 'Appeal'. "We will have to pay for this", one of them is supposed to have said¹².

The 'Appeal' puts the history of World War II and the earlier deterioration of Polish-German relations into a broader historical narrative, alternative to that officially developed in the People's Republic of Poland. The primary logic of the narrative is to present all relations with the western neighbour in such a historical context that evil and injustice, though important and painful, are nevertheless only a phase, an episode in the history of an otherwise flourishing neighbourliness.

According to the letter, Poland survived the war "not as a victorious state, but extremely weakened". However, Kominek remembered also the suffering of Germans. "We know very well how large numbers of the German population bore up under superhuman pressure exerted on their consciences, for years on end, by the National Socialists ... Thousands of Germans, as Christians and as Communists, shared the lot of their Polish brethren in the concentration camps." He calls the frontier on the Oder-Neisse line the "Hot Iron" of the neighbourhood. "We understand well that the Polish western border on the Oder and Neisse is, for Germany, an extremely bitter fruit of the last war of mass extinction. Part of the bitterness is caused by the sufferings of millions of German refugees and expellees". "We grant forgiveness and ask your forgiveness." This famous phrase is to be found in the final part of the 'Appeal'.

The letter was published on 18 November 1965. Two weeks later the German bishops' answer came. It contained a similar request for forgiveness, but no declaration of forgiveness was made. Neither did the German letter speak about the Oder-Neisse frontier. Although the Polish Episcopate described it as positive in an official communiqué, in a later correspondence between cardinals Stefan Wyszyński and Julius Döpfner a tone of serious disappointment may be sensed from the Polish side.

Soon afterwards a massive attack of the national press on the Polish Episcopate was launched. The following charges were made: treason, the willingness to return Polish Western Territories to Germany, equal treatment of injustice committed to Poles and to Germans. "The 'Appeal' is in fact a political sabotage planned for a long time, directed against the People's Republic of Poland", fulminated Władysław Gomułka at the 5th Plenum of Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party in December 1965¹³.

In a sense it is difficult not to admit that Gomułka was right. For the logic of the 'Appeal' claimed Poland's membership of a community of values alternative to the 'socialist society',

¹² H. Stehle, „Spróbujmy zapomnieć”. *Dlaczego biskupi niemieccy nie ujęli od razu ręki wyciągniętej przez Polaków*, trans. J. Grąbczewski and A.S. Charkowski, in: „Od nienawiści do przyjaźni. O problemach polsko-niemieckiego sąsiedztwa”, ed. F. Pflüger and W. Lipscher (Warsaw 1994), p. 92.

¹³ Quoted in: W. Ważniowski, *Stosunek władz państwowych do Kościoła katolickiego w Polsce 1956 – 1970*, (Siedlce 1999), s. 267.

which was being built according to the official People's Republic of Poland's propaganda. Firstly, Christian, secondly, European. The Christian religion is the source of European culture. Being a Christian and a European, one is inevitably closer to Germans than to communists, as the history of Europe is a history of Christianity, not communism. Communism, against the desire of its builders, is only a transitional state, an excrescence on a healthy tissue of Europe, like the crimes of the Third Reich.

In the 'Appeal', an attempt is made to restore the community based on a certain platform of values shared by all its members. It is these values which enable us to tell what we should apologise for and what we can forgive. But the bishops seem to say – if someone is a Christian, he should forgive, otherwise he is a communist. The two identities cannot be combined; therefore each and every one of us has the duty to make a choice.

Such a logic of defining Polish society requires further comment. Following the logic of the bishops' letter, the only alternative to communist Poland is Christian Poland. Christian not only in a sense of the origin of its culture but also as the determination of the identity of each (wo)man living on its territory. The alternative: "either you are a Christian or a communist", does not offer a third option to anyone who would not like to identify himself with any of these two possibilities. This very conservative definition of the Pole as a Catholic is not an attempt at making Polish society pluralistic; it implies an unconditional 'conversion' from socialism to Christianity. We should add that although the letter refers to the fact that "this period of occupation cost the lives of over 6 million of Polish citizens, in majority of Jewish origin", forgiveness is mentioned exclusively in the Christian context.

These imperfections of the 'Appeal', however, did not seem to have influence on its reception in Poland at the time; their presence comes to attention rather from today's perspective. At the time the main reason why not only the authorities but also society did not receive the 'Appeal' enthusiastically was the fact that Gomułka's anti-German policy was met with a favourable response. The memory of the atrocities caused by the Germans was too fresh for Polish society to accept moral criticism assuming that indisputable German guilt does not exclude Polish iniquities.

For decades the inventiveness and riskiness of the vision proposed by the bishops did not only provoke controversies but also inspired discussions about Polish-German relations. Most likely this is why after 1989 the 'Appeal' became, in the opinion of many, the symbol of the beginning of reconciliation between Poland and Germany. In November 1989, just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Chancellor Helmut Kohl visited Poland. During a service in Krzyżowa (Kreisau), a former seat of anti-Nazi resistance figure Helmut von Moltke and today the seat of a foundation devoted to Polish-German reconciliation, Kohl and Mazowiecki embraced each other, which was commented as another step in German-Polish reconciliation. In the press comments and references to the bishops' 'Appeal' reappeared. "This noble, wise and far-sighted letter meant the breaking down of the psychological barrier; it brought a new perspective into the thinking about Polish-German issues", wrote the editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza* Adam Michnik¹⁴. And Tadeusz Mazowiecki said that it was impossible to overestimate the role of the Polish bishops' 'Appeal', which in general made the Polish-German dialogue possible¹⁵. As will be seen in the next paragraphs, it has also become the most important reference when it comes to reconciliation, not only with the Germans.

Democratic Poland looks into the past - Jewish-Polish reconciliation

¹⁴ A. Michnik, „Nie chodzi o pomoc dla Polski”, *Gazeta Wyborcza* 8.11.1989.

¹⁵ B. Kerski, T. Kycia, R. Żurek (Eds.), *Przebaczymy i prosimy o przebaczenie, orędzie biskupów polskich i odpowiedź niemieckiego episkopatu z 1965 roku: geneza, kontekst, spuścizna*, Olsztyn 2006.

Only days after Krystyna Kersten's text about the pogrom in Kielce was published, martial law was enforced on Polish territory. This resulted in tightening the censorship again, and closing the possibility of an open discussion on Jewish-Polish war and post-war relations for another few years. The second half of 1980, however, delivered a few important contributions. In 1986 a special issue of emigrant magazine *Aneks* was printed in Paris. It contained two essential texts. One was 'Tabu i niewinność' (Taboo and Innocence) by *Aneks'* eminent emigrant intellectual and editor-in-chief Aleksander Smolar, which discussed the complexity of Jewish-Polish relations and the causes of Polish anti-Semitism. Another was an essay entitled "Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej... Ale go nie lubię" (This One is From my Country... But I Dislike Him) by a Polish historian living in the U.S., Jan Tomasz Gross¹⁶. Its main thesis was that apart from Poles who did save Jews, there were those, who were not only passive bystanders, but also active perpetrators in the Shoah. In 1987, an important article by an eminent literary historian Jan Błoński was published in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, entitled "Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto". The article, referring to a poem of Czesław Miłosz entitled "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto", discussed the problem of Poles' passivity towards the Holocaust during the war.

Gross' text from 1986 might have partly served as the first draft of the book entitled *Sąsiedzi* (The Neighbours)¹⁷, which he published in Polish in 2000. The book told the story of Jedwabne, a small town some 150 kilometres northeast from Warsaw, where on July 10, 1941, a mass murder took place. Most of the local Jewish population was led to a barn on the outskirts of the town and burned alive. The storm which the book caused was connected not only with the fact that in contrast to the pogrom of Kielce, the slaughter in Jedwabne was forgotten in Polish collective memory. It was due to what Gross uncovered: the Jews of Jedwabne were not murdered by Germans, but by their Polish neighbours (thus the title of the book). The murderers were not recruited from some marginal group, they were ordinary people, which Gross referred to in a footnote, writing about Christopher Browning's well-known book *Ordinary Men*, dealing with German policemen who participated in the Holocaust¹⁸.

The debate on the Polish-Jewish relations, started by his book, was considered by some of its participants the most important memory debate in Poland after the World War II¹⁹. Thousands of articles appeared in the press and a number of books were published. Among them – as Maciej Janowski points out – two were essential: one consisting of two thick volumes, edited by Paweł Machcewicz and Krzysztof Persak, entitled 'Wokół Jedwabnego' (Around Jedwabne), published by the Institute of National Memory; the second an essay of Anna Bikont 'My z Jedwabnego' (We, from Jedwabne), which reconstructs the details of the crime and the fates of both survivors and perpetrators²⁰.

On May 27, 2001, a festive expiatory service was celebrated in Warsaw in the Church of All Saints, which stands in the part of the town formerly inhabited by Jews. Father Adam Boniecki, editor-in-chief of *Tygodnik Powszechny*, wrote, "what happened on Sunday, May 27 in the biggest of the Warsaw churches, close to the place where the frontier of the Ghetto run 60 years ago, was a religious event that will forever be written into the history of

¹⁶ „Aneks” No 41/42, 1986.

¹⁷ Jan Tomasz Gross, *Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka*, Sejny: Pogranicze 2000. In English: J.T. Gross, *The Neighbors. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne*, Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press 2001.

¹⁸ This paragraph is based by a more detailed account on pogrom of Jedwabne, and the discussion that followed, see important contribution by Maciej Janowski, "Jedwabne, July 10, 1941: Debating the History of a Single Day", in: *The Convulsions of Historical Politics*, ed. Alexei Miller and Maria Lipman, CEU Press, Budapest 2012, pp. 59-89.

¹⁹ See Maciej Janowski, "Jedwabne, July 10, 1941".

²⁰ P. Machcewicz, K. Persak (Eds.), *Wokół Jedwabnego*, IPN: Warszawa 2002; A. Bikont, *My z Jedwabnego*, Prószyński i Sówka: Warszawa 2004.

Poland... The primate, as a sign of repentance dressed in a violet ornate, presided and almost 50 bishops participated, without mitres and liturgical robes, in black cassocks without red or violet belts". In a special service, the bishops offered an apology to the Jewish inhabitants murdered in Jedwabne and surrounding areas. In his speech, bishop Stanisław Gądecki referred to the 'Appeal' of Polish bishops from 1965 and the symbolic meaning of the year 2000, claiming that the millennium asks for memory work. "We, as pastors of the Church in Poland, stand in truth before God and men, especially in front of our Jewish brothers and sisters, recalling with regret and remorse the crime, which in July 1941 was committed in Jedwabne and surroundings... We undertake this task (the purification of memory – KW), and once again condemn all forms of intolerance, racism and anti-Semitism, which are known to be sinful" – said Gądecki.

At the same time, Father Boniecki observed that the catholic Radio Maryja was the only Polish broadcasting company on that day which failed to mention the commemoration in its newsreel. The bishop of Łomża, and the parish priest from Jedwabne decisively took the side of the town inhabitants, who rejected all accusations, and Radio Maryja together with rightist *Nasz Dziennik* wrote about an anti-Polish conspiracy and attack against the nation and the Catholic faith²¹.

No bishop, however, took part in the official state commemorations in Jedwabne on July 10, 2001, led by president Aleksander Kwaśniewski. "As a man, a citizen and as President of Poland – I apologise. On behalf of myself and Poles whose conscience is shattered by the crime in Jedwabne," Kwaśniewski said in the pouring rain. "This rain is a sign that God wants to cry with us today," said Shewach Weiss, ambassador of Israel in Poland²².

A special commemoration has been repeated in Jedwabne on July 10th every year ever since. On the 10th anniversary of the first apology, the words of remorse and request for forgiveness have been repeated by the current president of Poland, Bronisław Komorowski. Even though the commemorations have always been controversial due to the attitude of a part of Jedwabne's inhabitants, it seems a new era in Jewish-Polish relations has started in Poland. A symbol of this might be the opening of the permanent exhibition in the new, monumental Museum of Polish Jews, planned for later this year.

A worn-out formula of forgiveness? Ukrainian-Polish reconciliation

During the night from March 2nd to 3rd 1945 a branch of AK (Armia Krajowa, Home Army) and members of the Polish self-defence from the surrounding area carried out the pacification of Pawłokoma, a small Subcarpathian village some 30 kilometres from Rzeszów, populated mostly by Ukrainians. Many residents were shot, and a large group was gathered in the village church, which was then set on fire. According to various historic analyses, 150 to 360 people were killed. The exact number of victims is today a subject of controversy, as is the question whether only men or also women and children were killed in Pawłokoma, as there was never an exhumation.

The pacification in Pawłomoma was the local culmination of an ongoing conflict in the Subcarpathian region which had developed since roughly 1943. Polish witnesses explained what happened by referring to earlier attacks on Poles in the region, cases of collaboration of

²¹ Quotations from A. Boniecki and paraphrase of *Nasz Dziennik's* writings in: Maciej Janowski, "Jedwabne, July 10, 1941". Quotation from S. Gądecki: "Skruca za Jedwabne", *Gazeta Wyborcza* No 123, 28.05.2001, p. 6 [available at: http://www.archiwum.wyborcza.pl/Archiwum/1,0,1437102,20010528RP-DGW,SKRUCHA_ZA_JEDWABNE,.html].

²² Mikołaj Lizut, „Bóg płakał razem z nami”, *Gazeta Wyborcza* No 160, 11.07.2001, p. 1 [available at: http://www.archiwum.wyborcza.pl/Archiwum/1,0,1476211,20010711RP-DGW,BOG_PLAKAL_RAZEM_Z_NAMI,.html].

Ukrainians with the Gestapo, and most of all the disheartening mass-murders in Volynia, where in 1943 –1944 two Ukrainian organizations, the UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army) and the OUN (Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists), executed about 60,000 Poles.

On May 13th, 2006, for one day, Pawłokoma became the centre of Polish-Ukrainian relations. On a small cemetery in the heart of the village, at a monument commemorating the Ukrainian victims, Polish Roman Catholic and Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests celebrated a common service, in the presence of the Polish and Ukrainian presidents Lech Kaczyński and Viktor Yushchenko. The politicians put flowers at a symbolic grave for the Ukrainian victims and delivered speeches, calling on their nations to forgive one another.

The ceremony in Pawłokoma was meant to be the next step in the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation process. Already before, common commemorations of the 60th anniversary of the massacre in Volynia were organised in Pawliwka, in the presence of the presidents of both countries, Aleksander Kwaśniewski and Leonid Kuchma. A serious breakthrough came during the Orange Revolution in 2004/2005. It was the first time that Polish society – especially the younger generation – showed itself in public manifestations of solidarity with the people standing on Maidan and with Ukrainians more generally. On the other side of the border, the crowd gathered on the Maidan in Kiev did not only shout the name of their new president – “Yushchenko, Yushchenko”, but also “Long live Poland!” Half a year after the revolution – in June 2005 – Polish and Ukrainian bishops wrote a common appeal, referring to the letter of the Polish bishops from 1965. In the same year the Cemetery of the Lviv Eaglets, of great symbolic importance for the Poles, was reopened.

The ceremony in Pawłokoma did not cause as big a controversy and discussion as the Polish bishops’ letter from 1965. A few articles were published and *Tygodnik Powszechny* compared Pawłokoma to Jedwabne, but in the long run the declaration was unnoticed, and just as after earlier declarations, knowledge of the events of 1945 in the Polish-Ukrainian borderland remained negligible – specially in contrast to the consequences of the debates after the ‘Appeal’ from 1965 or the book ‘Neighbours’ by Jan Tomasz Gross. Thus the voices of apology did not contribute to building public awareness.

What could be the reasons? One was the ceremony’s content. The beautiful ecumenical liturgy, as well as the solemn declarations of the presidents certainly were meant to have a magical function and could have made a big impression on the audience. The speeches of the politicians, however, were far from the innovativeness and controversy, which was caused by the Polish bishops’ letter or the declarations of apology in Jedwabne even though they certainly contained conciliatory elements, words like “repentance”, “forgiveness”, “reconciliation” and “common future”.

However, apart from very general references to the history of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict, the statements of the priests and the presidents contained hardly any details. Lech Kaczynski admitted that “all the tragic events in Pawłokoma, Chełm, Volynia, Eastern Galicia, should be duly explained in the dialogue of politicians, historians and ordinary people”. Viktor Yushchenko spoke very generally about the common heroic Polish-Ukrainian history²³. None spoke of a concrete number of victims or on the controversies whether women and children were among the murdered. The names ‘UPA’ or ‘AK’, controversial for both neighbouring countries, were not mentioned. It was not sure what the presidents thought personally about the events 60 years ago. Nor was there a clear indication for a recognition of the tragedy on either side. This caused a certain disappointment. In a way the ceremony was too politically

²³ Both speeches in Polish in: Karolina Wigura, *Wina narodów. Przebaczenie jako strategia prowadzenia polityki*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2011, pp. 238-241. Ukrainian version of Viktor Yushchenko’s speech at: www.president.gov.ua.

correct, too superficial, to confront the audience with the necessity of asking serious moral questions.

But there was another reason why the ceremony in Pawłokoma did not turn out to be a breakthrough in Polish-Ukrainian relations. By 2006, the proliferation of declarations of repentance and forgiveness was so large, both globally and in Poland, that it was simply very difficult to say or show anything as fresh and morally demanding, like e.g. the Polish bishops in 1965. Poland's remembrance culture has truly become Europeanised, public apologies have become one of diplomatic necessities, but not necessarily reasons for controversy or heated public debate.

In some sense, however, the further history of Ukraine wrote a positive ending to the country's reconciliation process with Poland. In 2013/2014, when the Euromaidan activists started to protest against Viktor Yanukovich's decision not to sign the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement, Poles were very involved with the Ukrainian democratic revolution. Not only did Polish politicians become ambassadors of Ukraine in Brussels, but also thousands of people joined marches of solidarity organised in Polish cities. Media and intellectual communities have been commenting thoroughly on the Ukrainian revolution. On the social media, some texts and messages calling for Ukrainian-Polish reconciliation were posted like the article "Affluent Poles Looking at Ukraine" written by the editors of political and cultural weekly *Kultura Liberalna*.²⁴ The article referring to Jan Błoński's earlier mentioned text "Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto" discussed the possibility of a new, friendlier approach towards Poland's Eastern neighbour. 30 Polish candidates for the European elections signed the appeal to put up a memorial for the Victims of Maidan in the building of the European Parliament in Strasbourg.²⁵ The issue of Polish-Ukrainian relations during World War II still remains highly controversial, but the quantity and quality of the discussion gives hope that this time the process of reconciliation will not be abandoned.

Epilogue: Polish and European remembrance culture in the 21st Century

"Are Poles good Europeans?", "Will Poland finally return to Europe?" – these questions, as strange as they may sound to today's readers, were seriously raised ten years ago, when Poland was about to become a member of the EU. After that decade, Poland has become a completely different country. The shabby infrastructure inherited from communist times has been improved in revolutionary pace with European financial support. Younger generations of Poles do not even remember the times when one needed to queue for long hours before crossing the border with Germany. Warsaw has gained the status of an important player in Brussels. The change was been evidenced by a recent special supplement about Poland to *The Economist* where it was stated there had not been such an affluent period in the country's history since the Jagiellonian era.

But as Poland is changing, Europe is too. The language of accounting for the past was over decades tied to a critical approach to the past, a wariness of all ideological blindness and populist rhetoric. As the memory of the two totalitarian regimes – brown and red – is fading, sites of the common European culture of remembrance have been gradually, unobservedly colonised by completely different narratives. A dangerous syncretism has appeared in the language of politicians and commentators. On the one hand, the war's victims are still honoured and perceived through the lens of the pernicious consequences of political extremes. On the other hand, mainstream discourse has become permeated with discriminatory rhetoric against minority groups: the Roma, North African immigrants, European Muslims etc.

²⁴ <http://kulturaliberalna.pl/en/2014/03/11/affluent-poles-looking-ukraine-much-lecturing-enough-support/>.

²⁵ <http://kulturaliberalna.pl/2014/05/22/apel-kandydatow-parlamentu-europejskiego-upamietnienie-ofiar-majdanu/>.

This syncretism in the European approach to the past, acts in concert with the fundamental geopolitical change that took place 25 years ago. The simple duality of the politics of apologies and of settling accounts reflects the bipolar logic of Cold War-era thinking. On the political level the fall of the Iron Curtain brought along a mutually interactive world devoid of simple divisions. In the domain of collective memory, meanwhile, it brought a deep democratisation. Unfortunately, these changes have neither led to the establishment of a European identity, nor have they increased self-confidence or trust in others. If Europeans do not realise in time what is happening to their identity, the consequences might be dramatic.



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