

Strzemiński's *Wunderblock*. In Memory of Friends – Jews

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Abstract

The text addresses a series of ten collages titled *To My Friends the Jews*, made right after the Second World War by a Polish avant-garde artist, Władysław Strzemiński. I analyse these works (focusing especially on one of them, titled *The Empty Shinbones of the Crematoria*), using the Freudian metaphor of *Wunderblock*, as well as Aleida Assmann's concept of communicative, collective, and cultural memory. Basing on the available documentation, I suggest an alternative title for the series, mentioned by the artist, with memory as its integral part.

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"The future needs roots."
Ernst Bloch¹

[1] The series of ten collages titled *To My Friends the Jews* by the celebrated Polish avant-garde artist, Władysław Strzemiński (1893–1952), was made right after the Second World War, between June 1945 and February 1947. In this text, I would like to analyse this series taking into account the forms of memory it is constructing. I will focus most of all on the work titled *The Empty Shinbones of the Crematoria* (Fig. 1). From the vast amount of literature produced in the field of memory studies I will select Sigmund Freud's figure of *Wunderblock* and the concepts developed by Aleida Assmann. Notably, various forms of memory and remembering, its flow and balance, psychomachia and compromise between openly presented and repressed content are linked in Strzemiński's work similarly as they are in the Freudian metaphor. Assmann's works, on the other hand, constitute a cogent presentation of the shift from individual, communicative memory, through cultural memory, to collective memory, and emphasise the dynamics of memory, the points of stability required for its shaping, as well as its political and social

¹ Reference to Ernst Bloch's formula "The future needs roots" after Aleida Assmann, "1998 – między historią a pamięcią", in: *Pamięć zbiorowa i kulturowa, Współczesna perspektywa niemiecka*, ed. M. Saryusz-Wolska, Kraków 2009, 164.

meanings. It seems that similar mechanisms operate in the production, transmission, and distribution of Strzemiński's series. Basing on the letter written by the artist in 1947, I will suggest an alternative version of the series's title, with memory as its integral part.

Strzemiński and the memory of Shoah

[2] It is not my intention to describe the social frameworks of memory in Poland in the 1940s, or to refer to narratives of the complex history of this period², but merely to point to the crucial area that defines this time – namely the brutal postwar anti-Semitism. "The greatest war in history left Poland terribly wounded and terribly transformed by these wounds", wrote Andrzej Paczkowski³. At the same time, as researchers prove, anti-Semitism was a widespread sentiment in Poland right after the war⁴. Acts of harassment against Jews who were coming back to their homes, attempts at intimidation, as well as murders, anti-Jewish riots, and finally pogroms were especially brutal in the years 1944–1946. On the other hand, as Zofia Wóycicka noted, Shoah was present in public discourse in Polish society of the second half of the 1940s. Among the emerging narratives of the past one might distinguish memory that emphasised the exceptionality of the suffering and martyrdom of Jews, formulated by the Survivors of the Holocaust, as well as dominating memory that universalised the pain of the victims by referring to Polish or, more broadly, to all victims of the war, concentration camps, and forced labour camps⁵. In this context, Strzemiński's series gains new meanings: it produces a kind of active and dynamic memory of fields of knowledge constantly eclipsed in Polish debates about the experience of the Second World War, memory that is often being modified. For, the question concerns the memory of the Holocaust of the Jewish population, rather than merely the memory of war⁶.

[3] Strzemiński had his own biographical reasons to do as he did. In Łódź, where he had spent the war with his family, he could see the Holocaust close at hand, and his subject position can be seen as controversial. The Łódź ghetto, created on 8 February 1940, though hermetically sealed and isolated from the city, was visually accessible – it could be penetrated with the eye, for it was surrounded with a fence, not a wall⁷.

² On the history of the period see for example an impressive study by Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga. Polska 1944–1947*, Kraków 2012.

³ Andrzej Paczkowski, *Pół wieku dziejów Polski. 1939–1989*, Warszawa 2000, 147.

⁴ See for example Alina Skibińska, "Powroty ocalałych i stosunek do nich społeczeństwa polskiego", Andrzej Żbikowski, "Morderstwa popełniane na Żydach w pierwszych latach po wojnie", in: Feliks Tych and Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, eds., *Następstwa Zagłady Żydów. Polska 1944–2010*, Lublin 2011, 39-70, 71-94; Jan Tomasz Gross, *Strach*, Kraków 2008; Jan Tomasz Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Złote żniwa*, Kraków 2011; *Wokół strachu. Dyskusja o książce Jana T. Grossa*, ed. Mariusz Gądek, Kraków 2008.

⁵ Zofia Wóycicka, *Przerwana żałoba. Polskie spory wokół pamięci nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych i zagłady 1944–1950*, Warszawa 2009, 135-160.

⁶ More on this subject see Luiza Nader, *Pamiętanie afektywne. "Moim przyjaciółom Żydom Władysława Strzemińskiego"*, in: *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i materiały*, nr 8, Warszawa 2012, p. 188-213.

⁷ I would like to thank Professor Jacek Leociak for bringing this fact to my attention.

Photographs integrated by the artist into his works are images preserved in a way on the retina of the eye of the beholder, whose identity is uncertain. Katarzyna Kobro, Strzemiński's wife, a Russian with German roots, refused to sign the Volkslist after coming to Łódź. However, to avoid danger (for example deportation to the camp), Kobro and Strzemiński signed the so-called Russian list. Although they refused to accept privileges related to it, for example a larger apartment, this act was not neutral⁸. Strzemiński was not a victim, but neither was he a witness; he was more of an observer of the Holocaust. I have an impression that this unstable, torn subjectivity, or his fear – to quote Czesław Miłosz – "not to be counted among the helpers of death"⁹, is an important affective framework for the interpretation of the series, as well as the foundation of the idioms of memory produced in it.

[4] Richard Ned Lebow indicates that the form in which one remembers the past is largely influenced by present events¹⁰. As Zofia Rosińska writes, Freud was also of the opinion that to understand the coded content, which is never a pure record of the original experience, one needs knowledge of the moment of coding, as well as information from which period of one's psychological life this content comes¹¹. In case of Strzemiński's work, I think it is crucial that the series *To My Friends the Jews* was made in the period of the most intense postwar anti-Semitism in Poland. The unclear date of the creation of the series (perhaps these works were made gradually, between June 1945 and February 1947) spans over two postwar years in Poland when anti-Jewish incidents and violence broke out almost on an everyday basis. The returning Jews were expelled from villages and towns, robbed and intimidated. This period saw pogroms in Krakow (11 August 1945) and in Kielce (4 July 1946), among other places. The pogrom in Krakow involved a crowd of over a thousand people, including members of the militia. Five Jews were killed as a result, and the anti-Semitic riots lasted for the whole day¹². The exceptionally bloody and cruel pogrom in Kielce involved the participation of several thousand citizens. As a result forty-two Jews were murdered (including two small children) and other forty were wounded¹³. I suggest that in Strzemiński's series there are inscribed both past events, as well as the present moment that determined memory and the means of remembering, the moment of production of memory. Therefore, we are dealing here not so much with

⁸ Nika Strzemińska, *Miłość, sztuka i nienawiść. O Katarzynie Kobro i Władysławie Strzemińskim*, Warszawa 1991, 55.

⁹ Czesław Miłosz, *A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto* (1943), in: Czesław Miłosz, *Selected Poems*, transl. Czesław Miłosz, New York 1973.

¹⁰ Richard Ned Lebow, "The memory of politics", in: Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner and Claudio Fogu, eds., *The politics of memory in postwar Europe*, Durham – London 2006, 8-9.

¹¹ Zofia Rosińska, "Doświadczenie mnemiczne, czyli fenomen pamięci według Zygmunta Freuda", in: *Ruch myśli. Teksty trochę filozoficzne*, Warszawa 2012, 132-133.

¹² Anna Cichopek, *Pogrom w Krakowie 11 sierpnia 1945*, Warszawa 2000, 67-93.

¹³ Helena Datner-Śpiewak and Alina Cała, *Dzieje Żydów w Polsce 1944-1968*, Warszawa 1997, 15-19.

trauma, as with a recording of the eye of an affective observer, staring both in the abyss of the past crime, as well as at the cruelty taking place in a given "here and now". Strzemiński's series embodies, then, various forms of memory: autobiographical and collective, communicative and cultural. It also embraces an aspect of one's own actual, affective relation towards the past which stabilises and opens this memory¹⁴.

The empty shinbones of the crematoria

[5] Strzemiński's *To My Friends the Jews* is a series of ten collages¹⁵. The artist gave nine of them to his student Judyta Sobel, and one to his friend, the poet Julian Przyboś. In February 1947 an individual exhibition of the artist's works took place, where he presented the above mentioned series¹⁶. Some parts of the series include components that significantly determine its interpretation: documentary photographs (e.g. from ghettos and camps), drawings copied from Strzemiński's war series, expressive commentaries handwritten on the reverse of each work, on the paper ground, and the title that embraces the entire series.

[6] The collage titled on the reverse "The Empty Shinbones of the Crematoria" was made on thick cardboard 33 x 23 cm in size (Fig. 1). It could have been a cardboard cover of a children's drawing block. The bottom part of the composition is filled with a slightly unevenly cut photograph adjusted to the width of the sheet. Traces of glue can be seen near its upper edge. The upper part of the collage is covered with a drawing, whose cardboard background was evenly painted white. The traces of white paint can also be seen in sections linking the photograph with the sheet of paper.

[7] The photograph presents a line of small skinny boys and three adults on the background of trucks. Most of the children were shown from the back. The star of David is attached on their uniforms, on the right hand side, near the shoulder blade. These are the young residents and their carers from Litzmannstadtghetto's orphanage. The procession begins in the bottom right hand corner of the photograph with a snapshot of the head of one of the boys and makes an arch towards the centre of the composition. In this place a group of children gets denser, and then they spread, walking in pairs towards the right. The boys walk in order, some are holding hands. Socks have rolled down their

¹⁴ More on this motif and the meaning of *To My Friends the Jews* as a protest against some form of shared approach of the Polish anti-Semitism in this period in my article "Kim jest Kain? *Moim przyjaciółom Żydom* Władysława Strzemińskiego jako protest wobec pogromowej atmosfery w powojennej Polsce", to be published in *Teksty drugie* in 2014.

¹⁵ Esther Levinger states that the series consist of nine collages and treats the collage from National Museum in Krakow as a separate work. For many reasons (among others – material and formal similarity of the works) I don't share this opinion. see: Esther Levinger, *Ruinami zburzonych oczodołów. Fotografia i historia, in: Władysław Strzemiński. Czytelność obrazów. Materiały z międzynarodowej konferencji poświęconej twórczości Władysława Strzemińskiego. Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 13-14 października 2011*, ed. P. Polit. J. Suchan, Łódź 2012, 83, footnote 1.

¹⁶ Zenobia Karnicka, "Catalogue of works", in: Jadwiga Janik, Zenobia Karnicka and Janina Ładnowska, eds., *Władysław Strzemiński (1893-1952). On the 100th anniversary of his birth*, ex. cat., Łódź 1994, 196-197.

skinny legs. Some of them are wearing hats. Two boys in the upper part can be seen in profile. One of them was captured by the camera while making a big step onto the pavement. He clutches tightly the hand of his friend, whose head lowered. It seems that most of the boys are holding something in their hands. A piece of bread? The attention of children focuses on the trucks. They are large and massive. Three carers watch the children, standing in the upper parts of the photograph. Behind the men on the right one can discern the figure of a policeman.



1 Władysław Strzemiński (1893-1952) *The Empty Shinbones of the Crematoria*, 1945, collage and ink on paper, 33 x 23 cm. Collection of the Yad Vashem Art Museum, Jerusalem. Gift of the artist, courtesy of his student Judyta Sobel-Cuker. Original title in Polish: *Puste piszczele krematoriów*

[8] The picture was probably taken from hiding by one of the photographers working in the Łódź ghetto (by Mendel Grossman?). It is suggested by its uncommon composition: the view of the line of children from the back, the cutting of the figures on the edges, and its snapshot-like nature.

[9] Right after the war, this picture was reproduced on several occasions, among others in an album titled *Zagłada żydostwa polskiego. Album zdjęć [The Holocaust of the Polish Jews. Album of Photographs]*, published in December 1945, as well as in a series of postcards published by the Central Jewish Historical Committee in Katowice in 1946 (in the series *Zbrodnie hitlerowskie w Polsce w czasie okupacji [The Nazi Crimes in Poland during the Occupation]*). In case of the postcard the picture was captioned: "Łódź – deportation of children from the orphanage". Both the photograph reproduced on the postcard, as well as the one presented in the album differ from the shot selected by Strzemiński. The reproduction was clearly cut by the artist on the left hand side (the empty space next to the line of children was reduced) and on the right hand side (some figures were "cut out")¹⁷. The picture used by Strzemiński was already of poor quality:

¹⁷ This version can be found, for example, in the catalogue exhibition of *The Last Ghetto. Life in the Lodz ghetto 1940-44*, ed. Michał Unger, Jerusalem 1995, 88.

bad focus, unclear details. Probably it was a photograph of a photograph. For this reason it was significantly retouched with pencil, ink, and white paint. The photograph used by the artist is actually covered with the drawing: the pencil contour reveals the figures of children, figures and faces of the carers, and the shapes of trunks of trucks. The pencil and ink retouching defines the background, emphasises the contrast, adds depth, and enhances details. It even changes the figure of one of the adults: in the original picture it is a skinny figure whereas in Strzemiński's picture it changes as a result of retouching into a large figure. Two figures of boys near the edges were almost drawn with pencil. Boys' hair was emphasised with ink.

[10] This kind of strong retouching is not surprising, considering that at some point Strzemiński planned to reproduce and widely distribute his series. Zenobia Karnicka directed my attention to this fact¹⁸. In the most important document about the series, in a letter to Samuel Szczekacz, Strzemiński mentioned that the series could be used as a "portfolio of prints"¹⁹. Also in the account provided by Marian Minich, the postwar director of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Strzemiński's work is defined as *Album*²⁰. Although there are no final proofs for that, one might hypothetically assume that the advanced retouching could be made by Strzemiński himself (the artist had a long experience in polygraphy), who made the series planning to print it (by photogravure?) or reproduce in a different kind of technique. The artist certainly treated the series both as an individual work, as well as a matrix that would allow for its reproduction²¹.

[11] The photograph used by Strzemiński is of referential nature, referring to reality, to a particular "here and now". It seems that for the artist it had meaning most of all as an image of a particular, the most tragic event in the history of the Łódź ghetto – Wielka Szpera [General Curfew] (5–12 September 1942). As a result of this action over fifteen thousand people from Litzmannstadtghetto were deported to Chełmno upon Ner death camp, including children up to ten years old, sick people, those unable to work, and people over sixty years old²². This tragic moment in the history of the Łódź ghetto was described by Dawid Sierakowiak, the witness of these events, in the following way:

Sunday 6 September

[...] Now it is Germans who go around with commissions and decide whom take and whom to leave. [...] All released children were to be gathered in one of the

¹⁸ Conversation with Zenobia Karnicka, Łódź, 6 October 2011.

¹⁹ Strzemiński's letter to Samuel Szczekacz from 26 October 1947. The letter is reproduced in: *Samuel Szczekacz (1917–1983)*, ex. cat., Berlin 2009, 46–47. I quote excerpts from the letter in further parts of the text. Here, I would like to express my gratitude to Zenobia Karnicka, who brought this letter to my attention, as well as shared with me her extensive knowledge on Strzemiński during our meetings and consultations.

²⁰ Marian Minich, *Szalona galeria*, Łódź 1963, 172.

²¹ I would like to thank Dr. Karolina Lewandowska for information on retouching and postwar photography.

²² http://www.lodzgetto.pl/litzmannstadt_getto_w_datach.html, 2–42 (accessed 16 October 2014).

hospitals. [...] People who hide their children in attics, toilets, and other holes are mad with despair. [...] I can't turn my attention away from my mum and suddenly, as if I were split in two, I find myself in her brain and her body. The hour of her departure is close and no help is coming. [...] The rain has fallen, but it brought no relief to our torments. No rain can wipe the heart torn apart and nothing can fill this eternal emptiness in the soul, mind and heart that is left after you lose the dearest person [...]²³.

[12] Although Strzemiński could not have been a direct witness of the crimes, yet it is highly probable that he knew about the events from September 1942, he had seen the despair and had heard the screams coming from the ghetto. As a father of a small girl, as well as a crippled man²⁴, and hence relieved from the obligation to work, he must have taken the news of the deportation of children and all those unable to work from the Łódź ghetto with fear and terror.

[13] The photograph used by Strzemiński does not show the crime, but the moment right before it happened. It is anticipated by the ruination taking place in the upper, drawing-covered part of the collage. The thick line of the ink presents enlivened, antropomorphised architectonic entities. The drawing announces not only death, the destruction of individual beings, the ruins left of a human being, but also the ruins of humanity. Within the frames of the photograph and the drawing there takes place the movement in the opposite directions of life and death. The children, full of life, presented in the picture, would be dead in a couple of hours. Objects, on the other hand, become alive, they move, and by moving they destroy, crush, bring to ruin. Significantly, contrary to the commonly shared opinion, the drawings incorporated by Strzemiński in his collage, were not literally copied from the artist's war series. They are characterised not by the operation of repetition, but rather displacement. This aspect will be developed in the following parts of this paper.

Wunderblock

[14] What makes for a characteristic feature of this and other works from the series is a subtle play of layers. The works have an uneven topography of the surface: over, under, visible, invisible, some elements from different orders of representations overlap. Also the slow movement inside the matter of the work: processes such as appearance, disappearance, erasure, are crucial parameters of these works. Therefore, I would like to look at Strzemiński's works in the perspective of overlapping, moving strata that penetrate each other, as a work which within triadic relation between the subject positions of the artist and the viewer works just like the dynamic structure of remembering.

²³*Dziennik Dawida Sierakowiaka*, Warszawa 1960, 195-206.

²⁴ As a result of an accident in the trenches of the First World War Strzemiński had a part of his left arm and right leg amputated.

[15] Contemporary neurological conceptions of memory emphasise the fact that memories are not just stored, but they are continuously reconstructed, although some of them are more stable than others²⁵. As Zofia Rosińska claims, memory can at present be defined as mnemonic experience, which engages remembering, recalling and forgetting, "interpreting, coding and decoding, constructing, recognising, as well as narration". The concept of memory as a dynamic coding structure, as Rosińska writes, was coined by Freud²⁶. He visualised memory using, among others, a figure of a mystic writing pad called *Wunderblock* (in a text from 1925)²⁷. The first layer, made of celluloid, was compared by Freud to a protective shield securing the psychological apparatus from the excess of stimuli, and the sheet of paper placed under it, with the visible script written by chisel – to stimuli provisionally inscribed by consciousness. The layer of wax hidden under the paper, on the other hand, which preserves what the chisel wrote – to the system of the unconscious, where no memory trace is lost. The peculiar feature of the mystic writing pad – disappearance and then another possibility of inscription – Freud described as the shimmering consciousness in the process of perception. Yet, the metaphor of *Wunderblock* has some significant shortcomings, which was indicated by Rosińska: it does not account for a kind of struggle between the conscious and the unconscious psychic content, and though it includes the impact of the present on the way the past is inscribed, it does not show how memory influences the present perception of reality²⁸.

[16] A significant shortcoming in the metaphor of *Wunderblock* can be found in the particular immobility of content hidden in the lowest layer – the unconscious, contrary to Freud's concept that it is the sphere of continuous activity, of displacements, substitution, disclosure or further coding. In Freudian mnemonic experience I am most of all interested in the above mentioned movement on the one hand, and on the other, in the overlapping of one memory layer with another, their interpenetration, the appearance and disappearance of overt content.

Layers and movement

[17] I would like to distinguish several strata in Strzemiński's work. Photographs would be the layer engaging the conscious perceptions, the most literal and at the same time the most inconstant. In my view, the unconscious strata, though inscribed permanently, would work similarly as the drawing and the textual commentary. The most obvious and in the same time hidden would be the title.

²⁵ Aleida Assmann, "Three stabilizers of memory: affect – trauma – symbol", in: Udo J. Hebel, ed., *Sites of memory in American literatures and cultures*, Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg 2003, 15-30.

²⁶ Rosińska, *Doświadczenie mnemoniczne, czyli fenomen pamięci według Zygmunta Freuda*, 130.

²⁷ Zygmunt Freud, "Wunderblock", transl. Zofia Rosińska, in: *Pamięć w filozofii XX wieku*, Warszawa 2006, 51-52.

²⁸ Rosińska, *Doświadczenie mnemoniczne*, 136.

[18] The most provisional and slowly yet irrevocably disappearing are photographs of the Holocaust, which are literal and capture the image of suffering and death. Similarly, in Freud's concept, the structure of the mystic writing pad suggests that what is written under the celluloid protective layer is of fleeting nature. The photograph fades more and more and on its surface we can see the initially invisible structures of the retouched drawing: the light patches of white paint dramatising the image, enhancing the contrast of fields and lines of black ink, or finally scratches. What we are dealing with here is a process of disappearance and leaving permanent traces, which are at the same time disfiguring the initial representation. The pencil contour of the drawing actually reveals the disappearing figures of children, the muddy ground or the shapes of trucks (*The Empty Shinbones of the Crematoria*). Patches of light made with white paint make the face of the man leaving a bunker in the Warsaw ghetto an abstract visual dominant of the image (*With the Ruins of Demolished Eye Sockets*), while scratching enhances the wounds in the representation of a victim of quasi-medical experiments (*Stretched by the Strings of Legs*). However, the function of retouching in the visual layer changes. What was supposed to remain invisible, is suddenly striking, and retouching, working as the enhancement of "reality effect", slowly transforms into abstract forms. What was literal disappears in favour of the engramatic trace left by the artist in the very matter of the work. For this reason, paradoxically, the series is invested with incredible energy: of changes and transformations, touch and care, excessive vision and shortsightedness.

[19] "If I do not trust my memory – neurotics, as we know, are very distrustful of it, yet normal people have no reason to trust it either – I am able to support it and maintain its work through making notes" – wrote Freud in "Wunderblock"²⁹. Strzemiński, a Positivist and Constructivist by spirit, certainly had no trust in his memory, or more broadly – in autobiographical memory (partial, selective, and blurred in details). This is why in his *Wunderblock* he used photographs – a medium appreciated at the time for its referential qualities – as a visual fact, a proof. Next to the effects of the work of photographic camera, that is photographs, Strzemiński placed also his own projection, a material realisation of his own optical consciousness: the result of the continuous process of the exchange between the eye and the mind – his drawing³⁰.

²⁹ Freud, *Wunderblock*, 51.

³⁰ The concept of "optical consciousness" and the dependent forms of realism was presented by Strzemiński in his *Teoria widzenia* [*The Theory of Vision*], on which he had worked since 1945. *The Theory of Vision* was published posthumously in 1958, yet before this date its fragments were published in various arts and culture magazines. According to the theory, realism is a historically changing notion, an effect of the optical consciousness. The latter is not a given, but it requires effort and work. It is a kind of testimony to reality. On the one hand, it is being governed by historical and social processes, on the other, by mutual exchanges, the process of work between the eye (vision), the brain (thought), and body (its unconscious layers not so much on the psychological, but on the neurological level). In *The Theory of Vision*, Strzemiński mentions his war drawings, treating them as one of examples of the optical consciousness and defining them as works that engage physiological rhythm. Władysław Strzemiński, *Teoria widzenia*, Kraków 1974, 241. The book includes reproductions of two drawings (one from the series *Deportations*, the second described as *Wieś białoruska. XX w.* [*The Belarus Countryside, 20th c.*]).

[20] Drawing and writing on the background of the collage were rooted for good, as if in the wax layer of the mystic writing pad (that is in the unconscious field of the apparatus of perception). In its calligraphic, stylised, certain, yet also slow line, it is reminiscent of writing or signature, while the commentary placed on the reverse of the work is way more expressive than the drawing. Each time, the commentaries on the reverse were made in handwriting, with large, carefully shaped letters, more or less in the middle of the page. The phrase "the empty shinbones of the crematoria" combines both the human remains as well as the tool of their destruction in one being. It is an exceptional metonymy of genocide, of wiping its traces and, at the same time, of the impossibility of a complete destruction of material remains of the crime.

Displacement

[21] As I have already mentioned, the drawings of the war series made between 1940 and 1945 (*Deportacje* [*Deportations*], 1940; *Wojna domom* [*War Against Homes*], 1941; *Twarze* [*Faces*], 1942; *Tanie jak błoto* [*Cheap as Mud*] 1943–1944, *Ręce, które nie z nami* [*Hands That Not With Us*], 1945), have not been copied literally. In the moment when they were put on paper, the war drawings already functioned as autonomous works and, simultaneously, as frames, stills of particular individual memory – the record of war is created in the space in-between image and writing. They registered a mutual relation between the observer and the observed, being not only the record of the impressions of the eye of the subject, but also a record of the corporal reception of the gaze of the representation's object³¹. War drawings, whose character can be defined as specifically documentary, do not bear traces of direct references to the Holocaust of the Jewish population. As Janina Ładnowska indicated, *Deportations*, for example, connote rather the deportations of Polish population from Łódź, which was integrated with the Reichsgau Wartheland³². To use the language of psychoanalysis, I would like to suggest a tentative conclusion that Strzemiński uses drawings not so much in the function of the repetition of the content, but rather its displacement (*Verschiebung*). Neither in the visual sphere are these literal copies³³. For example, the upper part of the collage *The Empty Shinbones of the Crematoria* is filled with a drawing from Strzemiński's war series titled *War Against Homes* from 1941³⁴. In relation to the original the drawing was significantly cut: it is deprived of the empty space and significantly reduced from the bottom and upper right hand side, which resulted in the elimination of one of the forms at the bottom and the cutting of almost one third of the shape on the right hand side. While the drawing from

³¹ Strzemiński, *Teoria widzenia*, 241.

³² Janina Ładnowska, "Rysunki – realizm rytmu fizjologicznego", in: *Władysław Strzemiński. In memoriam*, Łódź 1988, 132.

³³ Turowski pointed to this problem when he wrote about a slight "shift" and "a different placement in the field" of drawings used in the collages in relation to the originals, cf. Turowski, *Budowniczość świata*, 228.

³⁴ I compare here the collage to a drawing from a private collection, defined in the catalogue as II.49, *Władysław Strzemiński (1893–1952). On the 100th Anniversary of his birth*, 189.

1941 presents certain complete whole – the view of ruins placed on an abstract white background, the drawing integrated with the collage is characterised by fragmented representation. The drawing from 1941 focuses on emptiness, void, abandonment. The empty houses are visual figures of deportation of people, ellipsis of the forced exile of their inhabitants and users. "The war against homes" is also a war against the man and his closest "domestic" relations with people and objects. The characteristic wavy line describes most of all houses abandoned by people, undergoing the process of "destruction". In the collage, through the close-up, the focus is put rather on the movement of the line than on emptiness. Objects are presented in a surprisingly lively fashion and it is difficult to guess that these were houses, for they look more like organisms disintegrating into patches of cells. The structure-losing objects look as if they were lamenting. In the former case memory image evokes emptiness³⁵, in the latter, a kind of movement – disintegration and destruction, and at the same time lamentation. Can this operation be defined as a displacement of content from symbolic presentation of the space of trauma (drawing) to the metonymic expression of affect (collage)? Don't these operations contain the displacement of activity of perception of the viewer from emptiness to mourning, from architectonic remnants, relics to a kind of lamenting movement? Should not the shift from the war drawings to collage be defined as a significant displacement from death to life, but life in mourning?

In memory of friends – Jews

[22] The most covered, though at the same time paradoxically the most exposed layer of Strzemiński's work, something that cannot be seen for it had not been written on any sheet of original collages, is the very title *To My Friends the Jews*. And yet, in an already mentioned letter to Samuel Szczekacz from October 1947 Strzemiński titled his work differently: *Pamięci przyjaciół-Żydów* [*In Memory of Friends – Jews*].

Dear Sir!

I was very happy to find out that you remembered. I am sending (for now I already have the address) 4 reproductions of my drawings. Earlier this year I had an exhibition in Łódź titled *In Memory of Friends – Jews*, where I used my war drawings combined with photographs. This way there was formed a series that could be used for print as a portfolio of prints. I have given these prints after the exhibition to one from Hashomer to find your address and send these drawings to Palestine. I would like you to organise there an exhibition of these drawings and then you can do with them whatever you wish. Because I had no address and I was facing some serious reactionary hostility because of my exhibition, plus I had my divorce trial (Kobro showed during the war who she really is) – I neglected taking care of this matter. At present I reminded him of this and I will make sure it happens [...]³⁶.

³⁵ More on emptiness, abandonment, and the atmosphere of disintegration in reference to the series of war drawings *Deportations* (1940), *War Against Homes* (1941) and *Faces* (1942) and a shift towards the description of traces and in-existence in the series *Cheap as Mud* (1943-1944) in Andrzej Turowski, *Budowniczość świata*, 222-225.

³⁶ Excerpt from Strzemiński's letter to Szczekacz from 26 October 1947. Reproduced in: *Samuel Szczekacz 1917-1983*, 46-47.

[23] The origin of the title used at present, *To My Friends the Jews*, is not entirely clear to me. It cannot be found on any of the collages of the series. Most probably, the title was accepted by Yad Vashem after Judyta Sobel, at the time Strzemiński's exceptional student, who donated the series. I consider it entirely her decision³⁷. Zenobia Karnicka – the author of a detailed catalogue of the artist's works – accepted the title *To My Friends the Jews* after the scholar of Strzemiński's oeuvre Zofia Baranowicz, who, on the other hand, could have known it only through correspondence with Judyta Sobel or Samuel Szczekacz³⁸. Just as it happened with many other works by Strzemiński, the new title could have been a result of a simple slip of the tongue or a mistake. For example, in his memoirs, Stefan Krygier, Strzemiński's friend, calls one of the collages from the series *Lepka plama śmierci* [*The Sticky Spot of Death*], while actually it is *Lepka plama zbrodni* [*The Sticky Spot of Crime*]³⁹, Julian Przyboś refers to collages as drawings⁴⁰, and one of the series of war drawings would for a long time be titled *Wojna domowa* [*Civil War*], while at present the title is accepted as *Wojna domom* [*War Against Homes*]. None of the accounts that are temporally close to Strzemiński includes the title of the entire series. There is, of course, a possibility that Strzemiński decided by himself to change the title. However, it also seems that Strzemiński's letter to Szczekacz is the only known document where the artist gives the series a specific title. Of course, I am aware that this matter demands further detailed examination in the documents of the series in Yad Vashem⁴¹. Let me take the risk of failure, however, and imagine that this series was titled *In Memory of Friends – Jews*. What kind of interpretive consequence would this change bring?

[24] This modification in the title seems to me of major significance. The linguistic nature of the title *To My Friends the Jews*, combines a particular call with a universal message. Similar is the case with the title used in Strzemiński's letter. The phrase, *In Memory of Friends – Jews* puts rhetorical and affective accents quite differently. The present version of the title is devoid of the word "memory". In the version mentioned in the letter there is no reference to the personal pronoun "I", this title is more simple, like a dedication in a book or in a photograph. It is a kind of *hommage*. It recalls the past, calls for its remembering, for testifying it, but it also recalls the present – the moment of dedication, when paying homage and recognising the loss is necessary. In Strzemiński's

³⁷ Very often it is being mistakenly stated that Strzemiński donated his series to Yad Vashem via Judyta Sobel. In fact, the artist died on tuberculosis on 26 December 1952, while Yad Vashem The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority was founded in 1953.

³⁸ Telephone conversation with Zenobia Karnicka, 12 August 2014, cf. Karnicka, "Catalogue of works", note on p. 162.

³⁹ Stefan Krygier, "Władysław Strzemiński – artysta, pedagog. Wspomnienia" (1956), in: *Władysław Strzemiński. In memoriam*, 40.

⁴⁰ Julian Przyboś, "Nowatorstwo Strzemińskiego" (1956), in: *Władysław Strzemiński. In memoriam*, 31.

⁴¹ I was greatly helped in solving the matter of the title by Zenobia Kalicka. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to her.

title the accent is being transferred from the remembering one to the remembered ones, to a friendly relation with the collective subject – friends Jews and to the memory itself. His work is addressed both to the dead ones as well as to all those who survived, on both individual and collective level. Strzemiński memorizes specific individuals – his Jewish friends such as Julian Lewin or Aniela Menkes, as well as proclaims affective remembering (saturated with the relation of friendship) of the dead ones⁴². However, through his dedication *In Memory of Friends – Jews*, Strzemiński also wants to be a part of memory, since, as I have already mentioned, the gesture of dedication not only memorizes, but also inscribes itself into memory. The question is: whose memory? As I have already claimed, this kind of memory of the Holocaust certainly did not belong to the discourse of Polish memory of the Second World War in the late 1940s. Memory constructed in Strzemiński's series in this period has preserved a highly individual character. However, individual memory, as Assmann claims following Maurice Halbwachs, is never alone, but it emerges in the network of exchange with others. It is characterised by constant intermingling with a space of certain community: with collective assessments, generational experience, and accepted cultural models⁴³. I think that Strzemiński offered his gift to particular friends, such as Pinchas Szwarc, Józef Kowner, Samuel Szczekacz, Judyta Sobel and Halina Ołomucka, a real community with which he was linked through the proximity of biographical and existential experience, although it was not the experience of war, but of avant-garde art⁴⁴. I suggest that these particular Jewish friends with whom Strzemiński kept cordial and intense contact, were an environment of individual memory that defined, if not even made possible, the remembrance of the Holocaust inherent in his series of collages. Strzemiński corresponded with artists Pinchas Szwarc and Józef Kowner after the war, and in their letters they also included brief accounts of the situation of Łódź ghetto. He did so also with Samuel Szczekacz, who had spent the war in Palestine. Halina Ołomucka, one of Strzemiński's students, was confined during the war first in the Warsaw ghetto, and then after the uprising in 1943 she had been deported to the Majdanek camp, later to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ravensbrück and Neustadt-Glewe. Liberation found her in the area of Mecklenburg. In the years 1945–1950 she studied at the State University for Visual Arts in Łódź under the supervision of Strzemiński. She left Poland in 1957⁴⁵. And finally

⁴² On the issue of friendship for the dead ones in the case of "To my friends the Jews" see wonderful essay by Katarzyna Bojarska, "Władysław Strzemiński and His Artistic Document of the Holocaust", in: Tomasz Majewski, Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska, eds., *Memory of the Shoah: Cultural Representations and Commemorative Practices*, Łódź 2010, 139-152.

⁴³ Aleida Assmann, 1998 – między historią a pamięcią, 143-173.

⁴⁴ Cf. Anna Saciuk-Gąsowska, "Uczniowie Strzemińskiego. Przyjaciele Żydzi", in: *Adlojada. Biografia i świadectwo*, Szczecin 2014, 113-126.

⁴⁵ http://pl.auschwitz.org/m/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=152&Itemid=12 (accessed 14 August 2014).

Judyta Sobel, who had spent the war hiding at her family's neighbours near Lviv⁴⁶, Strzemiński's student in the years 1947–1950. It was her whom the artist gave nine collages from the series. Sobel left Poland in the early 1950s. Perhaps her decision was a result of the pressure on avant-garde artists, coming from the introduction of Socialist Realism and gradually increasing since 1949. More important reason could have been the rising wave of anti-Semitism in the late 1940s.

[25] Where can one locate the moment when the present version of the title was chosen? Did it happen as a result of a simple slip of the tongue, or was it because of the overlapping of several motifs of memory? Or perhaps the work was re-titled by Strzemiński as his own independent decision? I still have no answer to this questions. Yet, I am convinced that the production, distribution, and reception of this exceptional series came and still comes together with processes described by Freud among others by means of the metaphor of the "mystic writing pad": recalling and forgetting, incessant coding and repression, displacement, substitution, and finally revelation.

Forms and stabilizers of memory

[26] Assmann distinguishes three forms of memory: communicative, collective and cultural⁴⁷. In this optic, as Kazimierz Wóycicki noted, communicative memory (ephemeral, torn, episodic) concerns individual level, appears and disappears together with individual people and generational experience, fulfils itself in conversation and in various commemorative practices⁴⁸. Communicative memory refers to certain sphere of privacy, intimacy, yet it remains in regular interaction with others, in communication, "it grows into people from the outside"⁴⁹. It lies on the intersection of individual ("the medium of the individual working through of experience") and collective memory.

[27] Collective memory emerges in the moment of decline (the death of messengers) of communicative memory. Whereas communicative memory has as its foundation a biographical experience, the source of collective memory lies in "knowledge and moral principles". It emerges on the condition that there is a will to preserve the memory of a generation, which otherwise disappears. Significantly, collective memory is a result of an emergence, as Assman writes, of certain political collectivity and social solidarity⁵⁰. It realises itself in the public realm:

it is a space – comments Wóycicki – where individual memories come in complex interactions with the whole of social and political life, as well as where emerges

⁴⁶ I have received this information from the Artist's son, Herman Zuker, for which I would like to offer him my deep gratitude.

⁴⁷ Assmann, 1998 – między historią a pamięcią.

⁴⁸ Kazimierz Wóycicki, "Zagadnienie historiografii pamięci", <http://kazwoy.wordpress.com/niemcy/zagadnienie-historiografii-pamieci> (accessed 14 August 2014).

⁴⁹ Assmann, 1998 – między historią a pamięcią, 158.

⁵⁰ Assmann, 1998 – między historią a pamięcią, 164.

social bond based on the sense of belonging to given historical community or on a sense of exclusion⁵¹.

[28] It serves legitimisation or delegitimation of the discourse of power. Cultural memory, on the other hand, crosses the borderline of historical experience of individuals and generations, it is a long-term memory. As Assmann argues, it is of material nature, it is being preserved in products of culture, artworks, various kinds of carriers of memory and information, in customs, holidays, and rituals. The repertoire of its content is integrated by science, that is why it requires the support of institutions, as well as continuous embedding in the present through debate, interpretation, and reinterpretation. By its transhistorical perspective it anchors societies in their identity (or – I could add – in non-identity), and due to its openness and diversity it does not succumb to political instrumentalisation⁵².

[29] Andrzej Turowski noted that the operation of introduction of a double collage (of drawings and photographs) to the structure of composition of *To My Friends the Jews* constituted memory as the core of the entire work.

The notions of trace, emptiness, reflection and lack, which we already know from Strzemiński's work made during the war, become now parts of a new image where they gain photographic concretisation as well as mnemonic space, where the Holocaust needs to be thought through

[30] wrote the author of *Budowniczość Świata*⁵³. Taking this comment into consideration, as well as Assmann's reflections on memory, I would like to indicate that the series *To My Friends the Jews* or *In Memory of Friends–Jews* fulfilled and still fulfils various overlapping memory functions. By referring to the artist's own biographical experience – the life next to the Litzmannstadtghetto, particular events in the ghetto, and in a wider perspective to the Holocaust of the Jewish population – the series worked as a medium of quite exceptional communicative memory, for it produced the memory about the death and suffering of not all victims of war, but Jews in particular. At the same time, it universalised it, for the Holocaust of Jews is shown as a central point where notions of humanity, history, and culture collapse. With this series, Strzemiński reacted to current debates, to the ubiquitous atmosphere, and to the particular historical events (e.g. the pogroms of Jews, the violence against Jewish community, the trials of Nazi oppressors). In the form planned by Strzemiński, that is as a portfolio of prints, the works could have played similar function to postcards and albums published right after the war by Central Committee of Polish Jews – documenting the crime, calling for justice, and warning against anti-Semitism. This work is a record that supports the fleeting communicative memory; it reveals its affective dimension. Affective traces can be found

⁵¹ Wóycicki, Zagadnienie historiografii pamięci.

⁵² Assmann, 1998 – między historią a pamięcią, 171.

⁵³ Andrzej Turowski, *Budowniczość świata. Z dziejów radykalnego modernizmu w sztuce polskiej*, Kraków 2000, 228.

in the artist's note which displays expiation of a "poor Pole looking at the ghetto"⁵⁴, shame, anger, as well as the blame of a passive observer of the crime.

[31] The series *To My Friends the Jews* or *In Memory of Friends–Jews*, being a personal response to the events of the war and the Holocaust, yet embedded in the social network of interaction, is at the same time a powerful object of cultural memory, a kind of transhistorical message, a letter addressed to its present as well as to the past and to the future. Strzemiński's work can be seen as a coded object of cultural memory of incredible energy. It is only through knowledge, education, the support of institutions, the development of particular ethical attitudes (e.g. shame, the sense of loss, the request for forgiveness) that it can be read by the viewers coming from the future. It constitutes historical potentiality, which demands reading, reinterpretation, as well as analysis by generations from the future, equipping them with the power to make change and to act.

[32] What I find interesting is the fact that the works have not become a part of Polish collective or social memory (as was the case with e.g. Andrzej Wróblewski's *Rozstrzelania* series [*Executions series*] from 1949), even though they were very much of an event in Polish art history. Strzemiński's series has for a long time remained inactive both as an object of display, as well as an object of historical analysis, and a growing interest in it is quite a recent phenomenon. For the first time all works of the series were described in detail by Zenobia Karnicka and reproduced in the already mentioned catalogue *Władysław Strzemiński. On the 100th Anniversary of his Birth*, accompanying an exhibition at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, opened in 1993. A text that initiated analyses of the series was a part of Turowski's book *Budowniczości świata. Z dziejów radykalnego modernizmu w sztuce polskiej* published in 2000⁵⁵. In 2005, the works from Yad Vashem collection were shown at the exhibition "Etched Voices: The Holocaust in the Art of Contemporary Artists" (6.V.2005-31.XII.2005, curators: Sorin Heller, Yehudit Shendar), which inaugurated Yad Vashem's new Exhibitions Pavillion⁵⁶. In 2008 the series *To My Friends the Jews* was displayed at a special position at a great, monumental exhibition *1945–1949. Repartir à zéro, comme si la peinture n'avait jamais existé* (24 X 2008–2 II 2009) at Musée des Beaux Arts in Lyon (curator: Eric de Chasse). In 2009 Strzemiński's series opened a remarkable exhibition *Polak, Żyd, artysta. Tożsamość a awangarda* (15 XI 2009–31 I 2010) at Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (curators: Joanna Ritt, Jarosław Suchan). From that point on the interest in the series *To My friends the Jews* has gradually increased⁵⁷. Strzemiński himself had shown it in Poland only once: in February 1947, at

⁵⁴ Jan Błoński, "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto", in: idem, *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto*, Kraków 2008, 11-33

⁵⁵ Turowski, *Budowniczości świata*, 222-234.

⁵⁶ I would like to thank cordially Niv Goldberg for this information as well as other insightful comments on my text and great help during my research.

⁵⁷ See for example Eleonora Jedlińska, "Cykle wojenne: rysunki i kolaże Władysława Strzemińskiego z lat 1939–1945. Doświadczenie wojny – żal i melancholia", in: Grzegorz

Salon Piotrkowska 102; yet, the exhibition was significantly overlooked, unnoticed, there are no memories of it and no reviews, and the artist mentioned the negative reception of it: "I was facing some serious reactionary hostility because of my exhibition"⁵⁸. I would link this fact with the shrinking space of memory of the suffering of Jews and commemorating their death, and with the entirely hostile atmosphere of the 1940s. Similar reasons, I suspect, stood behind Strzemiński's decision to give his collages to Sobel, when in 1952 she left for a scholarship to Israel. Around 1953 Judyta Sobel, already after Strzemiński's death, donated nine works of the series to the emerging Yad Vashem The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority. Therefore, it might be concluded that it was only her gesture of donation that fulfilled what Strzemiński had failed to achieve in the case of Poland – Sobel placed the series in the space of collective memory of the newly established state of Israel. She mediated between individual, communicative memory of the observer and the emerging collective memory of the witnesses of the Holocaust.

[33] Memory constructed by Strzemiński takes place in motion, in the mutual relation between photography, text, and drawing: from photography that presents life with death looming over it, through the textual metonymy of the crime and its wiping out, yet at the same time "an image in spite of all"⁵⁹, to the drawn recollection of life, yet life in grief and mourning. Strzemiński puts various fragments of memory and various forms of remembering on top of another, at the same time stabilising memory through affect. According to Assmann, there are three stabilizers of memory: affect, symbol and trauma⁶⁰. It is affect that seems to play the most important role in this approach, being, as Assmann claims, a core of memory. By being embedded in affect, images from the past preserve their clarity, though they feature as unconnected fragments.

[34] Drawing on Assmann's reflections to discuss Strzemiński's series, one may come to a conclusion that photography plays in the series *To My Friends the Jews* the role of an unchangeable perceptive content of memory, while the drawing expresses the affective relation (lament, mourning, grief) towards the event. A photograph of the Holocaust, and at the same time a photograph from the Holocaust, remains in its materiality within the

Sztabiński, ed., *Władysław Strzemiński. Uniwersalne oddziaływanie idei*, Łódź 2005, 91-99; Katarzyna Bojarska, *Obecność Zagłady w twórczości polskich artystów*, www.culture.pl and "Władysław Strzemiński and His Artistic Document of the Holocaust", in: Tomasz Majewski, Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska, eds., *Memory of the Shoah: Cultural Representations and Commemorative Practices*, Łódź 2010, 139-152; Małgorzata Osińska, "Between Reason and History: Władysław Strzemiński's Series of Collages To My Friends the Jews", MA dissertation, Courtauld Institute of Art, June 2010; essays: Esther Lvinger, "Ruinami zburzonych oczodołów. Pamięć i historia", Andrzej Turowski, "Nokturny Władysława Strzemińskiego", Luiza Nader, "Wina i wstyd. *Moim przyjaciółom Żydom Władysława Strzemińskiego*", in: Paweł Polit, Jarosław Suchan, eds., *Władysław Strzemiński. Czytelność obrazów*, Łódź 2012, 82-128.

⁵⁸ Strzemiński's letter to Szczekacz.

⁵⁹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, transl. Shane B. Lillis, Chicago 2008.

⁶⁰ Assmann, Three stabilizers of memory. Affect – symbol – trauma, 15-30.

sphere of referentiality, of the truth of "so it was". The photographic image affectively pierces through the viewer by means of knowledge gained through the drawn and written commentary by Strzemiński. The drawing, on the other hand, refers to the personal engagement and represents the category of authenticity, of affect that links now and then.

[35] Strzemiński's series can, then, be treated as a recording of the continuously working dynamic mnemonic experience: selective, blurred, displaced, of uncertain shapes, oscillating between memory and forgetting, coding and decoding, affective embedding and its withdrawal. What constitutes an exceptional power of the series is an impulse of individual active remembering, a personal affective relation, which though universalised, remains rooted in the memory work of individual experience. For, in *To My Friends the Jews* or *In Memory of Friends – Jews* Strzemiński completes a passage from the level of biographical experience to the level of cultural memory; from the position of an affective observer of the Holocaust he calls the viewers to start further, individual and collective effort to construct their commemorative, affective relation to the Holocaust. If the future needs roots, as Ernst Bloch claims, the remarkable works from the series *In Memory of Friends – Jews* provides a strong foundation for it⁶¹.

Translated by Karolina Kolenda

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⁶¹ Reference to Ernst Bloch's phrase *The future needs roots* after Assmann, 1998 – *Między historią a pamięcią*, 164.