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Remembrance as Embodiment in Contemporary Polish Memories

Abstract: This article aims to draw attention to the importance of the body in the shaping of personal, family and national memories, and in the process of giving meaning to history and making it understandable, even in its contradictions. Through an ethnographic research carried out in Poland, the paper focus mainly on the construction of family resemblances as an embodied experience of the past, and an entry point for studies on collective and personal memories. Three points will be discussed. First, the relationship between body and memory occurs in the tension between history and heredity, the latter covering both social and biological transmissions. A second nexus between corporeality and memory in family narratives is constructed on a “gendered” and “ethnicized” image of the individual and the social body. Third, memory has been considered as a technique of the body involving senses and practical skills. The concept of embodiment then contributes to a more dynamic, performative and inter-subjective understanding of memory.

Keywords: body, memory, Poland, social anthropology, family resemblances

Embodiment and Memory

One of the most remarkable features of memory in Central Europe is the extent to which family memory is enmeshed in public memories and family stories entwined in the “great” history of the nation (Kwiatkowski, Nijakowski, Szacka, Szpociński 2010, Welzer et al. 2002). Parallel to “official” memory—a nationally promoted construct supported by the imprint of historical rediscoveries, the rewriting of schoolbooks and the redefinition of urban space—family memory interweaves collective events with personal tragedies, placing individuals within a social group at the same time as it singles them out (Halbwachs 1925). In a historical context marked by military occupations, shifting borders and forced migrations, the transmission of memory has been both a potent instrument in the shaping of identity and a tool of resistance (Sawisz, Szacka 1990). Studies on memory carried out in Central and Eastern Europe tend to focus on narratives; the bodily dimension of remembrance and resistance, on the other hand, has been less explored.

The aim of this paper is to articulate the question of memory to an anthropology of the body and the affects. It is not surprising that there are still few links between these fields in contemporary anthropology and sociology. The social sciences needed to ascribe materiality with a heuristic value -bodily *hyle*,¹ the flesh of objects, before

¹ The Greek word *hyle* means “matter” (as opposed to “form,” *-eidos*); it also refers to the wood used for lighting fires or constructing buildings. The concrete obviousness of the word seems to me quite

the sensorial and material dimensions of memory could be considered. Attempts were made in the fields of sociology and anthropology to deconstruct the “natural” body in the 1930s (Mauss 1934), but it was not until the 1980s that, under the impulse of hermeneutics and phenomenology, a “corporeal turn” came to renew the anthropology of the body, memory and transmission.

The rereading of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) has facilitated the conceptualization of the body as open to the world, a world of shifting boundaries determining the continuum between objects and the self: an object exists through the body; “the embodied conscience would not initially be expressed as ‘I think’ but rather and at once as ‘I feel’” (Julien 1999: 21). From this perspective, the body is not an object—a support for representations, a machine producing metaphors or a blank page on which identities are written down—that is exterior to the individual. The body is the medium for the subject’s experience. As such, it produces social relations, affiliations, cultures: experience is always incorporated. According to the exponent of the embodiment theory, “Our lives are not always lived in objectified bodies, for our bodies are not originally objects to us. They are instead the ground of perceptual processes that *end* in objectification” (Csordas 1994: 7). The new theory produced new concepts. The concept of embodiment opposes two parallel figures: the “body” as a biological, material entity and “embodiment” as an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world (Csordas 1993: 12, see also Csordas 1990, 1993, Gordon 1990, Low 1994). The idea of the body as a generative source of culture rather than a *tabula rasa* upon which cultural meaning is inscribed, places each author “within the nexus of dualities between pre-objective and objectified, mind and body, subject and object, representation and being-in-the-world, semiotics and phenomenology, language and experience, textuality and embodiment” (*ibidem*, p. 20).

Theories on embodiment developed at the same time as an anthropology of the senses, as is indicated by studies emphasizing the “sensory profile” (Howes 1991), the “tactile mimesis” (Taussig 1991), the “sensory order” (Classen 1993), and “the body sensorium” (Duden 2002). These studies can be compared with a trend in the anthropology of the affects that interprets emotions as an incorporated cognitive experience (Rosaldo 1980, Lutz and Abou-Lughod 1990, Lupton 1998), a “re-transcription” of culture through sensations, through a being-in-the-world first understood in terms of the body (Pandolfi 1991). This sensorial approach penetrates the studies on memory and transmission too, as the work of Seremataki (1994) or Sutton (2001) shows.

The paradigm of embodiment has led to the collapse of the Platonic and Cartesian distinction between subject and object, and provides a useful inroad into understanding what memory becomes through the bodily experience and how it is transmitted through embodied social relationships. Joël Candau, in particular, reminds us of the “experiential, carnal, social and interactive dimension of transmission [...]” This is “proto-memory” transmission, performed through language, actions, gestures, emo-

appropriate in this context to convey the idea of a body understood in its substance, breath, moods, flesh and blood.

tions, acting “without thinking,” which “acts on individuals without their knowing” (Candau 1998: 115). As Navaez points out,

studies on collective memory have been very useful in helping us to understand commemorative rituals and events; or how social groups understand time, especially the past; or how, more generally, we enroll in universes of collective reminiscences and symbols. However, by encouraging at the same time the age-old Platonic bases with respect to the body, collective memory studies have first discouraged the idea that collective memory involves embodied dimensions and practices (2006: 52).

My contribution focuses on the two-way relationship between body and memory through an examination of two issues. First, that the embodiment paradigm helps us understand how the collective past becomes sedimented in individual and collective bodies and brings life to the past in shared presents. But what is the place of bodily experiences in the construction of the individual, family and collective memory? To answer this question, memory must be considered as a sensorial experience, based on reciprocal and active relations between what is passed on and the ways this is passed on. This bodily dimension is particularly significant when omissions, breaks, disruptions, traumas and disasters tie tongues and prevent any narration. Through his article “Collective memory and the sociology of *bricolage*” written in 1970, Roger Bastide was one of the first to focus on the importance of the body in processes of reinterpretation, *bricolage* or the construction of memory when the organization of a group, its structure, or its transmission relays are annihilated or deeply impacted by tragic events such as deportation, massacres, genocide. Through his analysis of the way Black Americans revive ancient rites dating back to the pre-slave trade era, Bastide points out that

those initiates (...), from Africa or America, have borne in the intimacy of their muscles their gods and ethnic ancestors in the shape of physical mountains—so that once they reached the new land, they would just have to listen to the musical leitmotifs of their deities, which their flesh embodied, and Africa would wake up and express itself again (p. 9).

Second, family and collective memories can throw light on bodily experiences: remembrance can give meaning to bodily aptitudes and techniques, but also to diseases or even to how a sick body is perceived. Working on neurasthenia in contemporary Latvia, the British-Latvian anthropologist Vieda Skultans reveals how, in her fieldwork, popular ideas on damaged nerves, heads and hearts are ways of representing the disrupted collective and patriotic body. Such representations serve to criticize the Soviet occupation of Latvia. When Skultans’s informants were asked about their medical history, it is clear from their narratives that references to illness were a means for evaluating past events. The deterioration of health reflected the deterioration of society: “Illness is used to flesh out and give weight and meaning to historical events. The spirit of testimony points to the social and collective nature of these narratives. Their anxiety is as much about collective as about individual survival” (Skultans 2007: 137). In the case of Latvian memory, the experience of suffering is at the core of the shaping of memory and of its transmission. Through the subjective experience, the suffering body of the testifier brings together at one and the same time the autobiographical, family and social narratives of the past. Neurasthenia affords a language for words

and gives meaning to the breakdown of family life, imprisonment, the German and Soviet occupations, deportations, the collectivization of farms and so on. Hence, body and memory are privileged sites for exploring identity matters and the relationship between the self and other.

Family Resemblances as Embodied Memories

The function of the body in the shaping of memories is at the core of the comparative research I am carrying out on family resemblances in Poland and Italy. Polish fieldwork began in 2002 and has consisted of collecting the stories of families from very different social backgrounds in Warsaw and, to a lesser extent, in Gdańsk. In Warsaw, data was collected in the Bielany, Młociny and Ursus districts, the Praga quarter and the city center. In Gdańsk, the majority of people interviewed lived in the Oliwa district. Research was carried out using ethnographical methods: genealogical tools, participant observation over a long period of time, the analysis of material culture, and the *thick description* as theorized by Clifford Geertz.

The interviews I led, and the life stories I listened to, began systematically with a reconstruction of family history. The use of genealogical tools not only enabled the reconstruction of kinship systems (kinship appellations, terms of address, rules of marriage and transmission of name and property, family ramifications etc.), but also provided insights into the extent of my interviewees' knowledge of family history and how this is passed on. The interviews were often held with individual members of the family e.g., first the child, then his mother, father, and maternal grandmother on a one-to-one basis. In other cases, the exchanges were more informal—at meal-times, for example. These differences in context bring out the inconstant, changing, inter-subjective character of reminiscences, which here took on the form of continual reconstructions, stories with multiple endings, rather than as narratives with a definitive, stable plot. My study also drew on functional elements of material culture in the transmission of memory—objects, family photographs, video recordings, personal diaries; these amplify and enhance the interviewees' accounts. Sharing in the interviewees' daily lives and celebrating occasions with them not only provided the opportunity for close observation of their experience, but for measuring the distance that exists between formal and informal discourses and practices. Indeed, the corporeal, sensorial dimensions of memory are absent from constituted and instituted speech; these play out in other ways as the days unfold: through small signs, the implicit, the understood; through the eloquence of silence. This study also shows how memory content, the questioning of memory and forms of transmission change as biographical and social time advances. Thus, a young person met first at the age of 12 and then at 18 will not have the same attitude towards the past, will not identify with the same members of the wider family when seeking out family likenesses, and will not consider the particularities of family and collective history in the same way. This paper is based on a study of 74 persons from a total of 11 families in Poland and 10 in Italy over a period of 12 years.

I have used the concept of family resemblances as defined by Wittgenstein in 1953. Referring to language and games, Wittgenstein described a number of phenomena interconnected by a series of overlapping similarities. The central idea is that no feature is absolutely common to all, but similarities crop up and disappear, as the similarities between members of a family—build, features, eye color, gait, temperament, etc.—overlap and crisscross. The “games”—practices and social interactions—allow likenesses to rise to the surface.

Family resemblances are at the core of family narratives. They produce an embodied experience of the past and represent an entry point for studies on collective and personal memories. These memories are sensory, in the literal sense of the word: they constitute a sensory matrix, based on elements of a common material culture and techniques of self (Mauss 1934), inducing multiple identification processes. The adjective “sensory” carries with it a dimension of vulnerability. The sensory memory is a wounded memory. Naming the absent, filling in genealogical gaps, or locating forgotten villages, is an art of those who make every effort to pass on the memory of the family. But, what body are we talking about? How is it mobilized to shape family and collective memories? The following examination of three typologies of bodily involvement will help clarify these issues.

Heredity and History

The first kind of relationship between body and memory occurs in the tension between history and heredity, the latter covering both social and biological transmissions. Family resemblances indeed first appeared to me as a means for mapping both family history and collective history. In other words, each body makes up a *mémoire*—though its signs are sometimes uncertain—of private and public events. The tone of one’s voice, or the color of one’s eyes and hair are not only signs of heredity and the marks of proximity and distance between members of the family or community, but also indicators of the shifts and changes in a nation’s history. The social dimension of reminiscence and family memory tends to obscure biological lines of heredity which acquire a dynamic of their own, breaking and intersecting in a temporality of flashbacks and flash-forwards. In the Polish context, such to-ing and fro-ing is marked by important historical landmarks: World War II, the Polish-Soviet War of the 1920s, the famine, and forced migrations. These events gave rise to what can be described as family myths. When, for the first time in her life, Iwona (50) dared to read her mother’s diary, she came across events she had been told *thousands and thousands of times* during her childhood: her mother’s involvement in the Polish resistance, her mother and father’s struggle against the Germans, each in different partisan forces, as well as the desperate search for food. Talking about the Russian features of her niece, Elżbieta (68) tells the story of one of her Polish great-grandfathers during the WWI: his forced enrolment in the Russian army, having to fight against his fellow countrymen, his desertion and trek across frozen country during the great Nordic winter to get back to Poland and avoid fighting

against his own people. Adam (51), like Hanna (27) and Kazimierz (41), describes the abandonment of the family home in Ukraine and the series of new beginnings that punctuated, both in time and space, the scattering and reconstitution of the family group.

My comparative research indicates that the link between historical, collective and family memories is specific to the Polish context. Historical events can be considered as founding for two reasons. First, they result in a spatial divide, as is illustrated by most of the Warsaw families I studied, who migrated from the country to the city and, in the case of those from the eastern territories, to the capital city. The loss of the family home, the uprooting of people from their territory, their beloved village or idealized hamlet, is still today talked about in a manner of open wounds. Second, one of the side-effects of war is doubts about lines of descent. This can be the case with orphans, or supposed orphans, and may result in the refusal to legally recognize a child. The expression *czas wojny* is used to voice both doubts on paternity and disappearances. A lone child on a photograph is referred to as a “child of the war,” *dziecko wojny*, even if the photograph was taken in the early 1960s. Genealogies are affected as much by doubts about ancestry as by the experience of abandonment. These doubts often give rise to a dual fantasy: that of non-affiliation and that of foreign aristocratic descent (Russian, Hungarian, Czech, Austrian). Sometimes the two fantasies overlap. For example, Elżbieta, who is mentioned above, modified her family story every time we met: at our first meeting it was suggested that her soldier grandfather may have had aristocratic origins, then, during the course of our many other interviews, he became an illegitimate child with an unknown history.

This feeling of a break in the continuity of generations leads informants to emphasize features, characteristics and other traits designed to reinstate a person in a line of descent. This search for signs can be described as a form of map-reading that gives individuals the opportunity to establish who and what they are in relation to other people. For example, when trying to explain the dissimilarity between the Russian features of her daughter and her own, one mother says *I do not know if Russians really have characteristic features; the Poles are such a mixed nation, so many people have been here, right? Russians, Turks, Tartars, Germans; it is a mixed nation, strong, and so the classic Polish woman is not at all a blue-eyed blonde, but rather a brown-haired, grey-green-eyed woman*. As it happens, this picture of the “classic Polish woman”—an ensemble of signs that can be drawn on in the context of a given performative situation—fits her appearance perfectly. Through the experience of bodily signs marked by the shifts and changes of history, the perception she has of herself as a Polish woman seems to be subjected to what Eizner and Szurek call the intertwining of national borders: “Polish Poland is somehow the absence of a place and the place of absence, where the blur of intergenerational narratives thickens even more the intertwining of national borders” (Eizner and Szurek 1990: 41). Every so often the experience of war gives ground to the family myth, and its resonance in the community at large is nothing but an amplified heartbeat.

Gender, Blood and Genes: Embodied Affiliations

A second nexus between corporeality and memory is constructed on a “gendered” and “ethnicized” image of the individual and the social body. Narratives about family likeness, particularly those connected to the transmission of national affiliation, show how pivotal a role the mother, and above all, the grandmother has in the recollection of the ups and downs of national and family life. While my informants genealogies generally reflect an undifferentiated, cognatic descent system, the vocabulary used relating to parenthood is heavily gendered and clearly weighted on the female side. Household unity is maintained in particular around the figure of the grandmother; it is she who enables forms of long-term or intermittent cohabitation to be established, and who ensures a strong hierarchy among generations.

The maternal grandmother is the central figure in the transmission of family and collective memory. This central role is based on a system of practical relays, such as taking care of the home and children. This focus on maternal relays takes on a peculiar significance in light of Poland’s history. Indeed, these hardworking grandmothers recalled by my informants are figured as contemporary versions of the *matka bohater-ska*—mother of the hero—a character in Polish romantic mythology who, in times of exile or foreign occupation, contributed to the undercover propagation of language, culture and religion (Jarzębski 1993, Laurence-Kot 1992). Similarly, through her functions, the grandmother maintains the physical and spiritual well-being of society, as memory and traditions are carried on from one generation to the other. This can be seen for instance in the active role of Polish women in World War II and in its memory (Kwiatkowski 2008), and in women’s involvement in the “Solidarność” union as studied by Kristi Long. Taken together, these examples demonstrate the success of these women’s interventions and their ability to exist as a group (for example the “litanies of food,” see Long 1995: 49).

The importance of women in the transmission of memory and in maintaining continuity of the group is also apparent outside of the function of the family in providing shelter and food. A double process is at work here: the very “essence” of the Polishness passed on through the generations articulates gendered considerations, just as identity takes precedence over gender differences and affiliation issues. The very “essence” of the transmitted Polishness articulates gender differences and national affiliation, and these are naturalized in a joint process. What Iwona says is pertinent here:

Interviewer: *What character do you think is really transmitted from one generation to the other?*

Iwona: *Women’s ingeniousness; all the women in our family are resourceful, creative, tough, strong, aren’t they? (She turns to face her cousin, stressing her words with her fist clenched) They are determined...*

Ewa: *And smart even...*

(...)

Iwona: *Right. We are so strong, we are no “kokotki” (chicks/tarts) [she shifts from the third person to the first person plural, and hence includes herself in the family group of women -family here means the maternal side], we are hateful.*

Ewa: *Yes, our blood is mean, terrible.*

The blood line running through the generations is seen to contain elements of the inescapable, thus providing the basis, on the mother’s side, for

a matrix of recognition. The body of the woman produces and reproduces a grid of identifications and prohibitions, thereby setting up a model of Polishness.

There are gendered ways of being part of the nation: a specific male way, and a notably female way. When I first interviewed Adam, a 51 year-old pre-retired army officer, about his family story, he took three photographs out of a box: one of his paternal grandfather, one of his father and one of himself, all in army uniforms. The pictures were displayed in chronological order, showing the grandfather first and the informant last. Three generations under one name, one gender and one line of work; the three uniforms showing their enrolment in different armies, possibly of warring nations—as described in the novels of Hanna Krall or Kazimierz Brandys. Yet the continuity linking these three men challenges the photographer's lens. With regard to women, this specific way to intertwine a gendered and national belonging can be read in the following remark: *We are not the kind of women who say 'chéri, chéri'. Oh, no! We have always worked hard, but men love women who don't do anything, who admire and flatter them and say, 'You are so handsome and so brave'* (Zosia, 70 years old).

Blood ties also imply qualities of stability and continuity: one “is” someone else's blood, *on/ona jest moja krew*, as informants would say of those children who look like them. On the other hand, this naturalizing logic does not take into account the upsets of history and the diverse origins of the Polish population. That is why other stories, less dependent on the unpredictability of genetics, tend to give less importance to the blood line and develop narratives according to a different identity logic. The “biologization” of affiliation puts the emphasis on a seemingly continuous blood line running through generations. This approach contrasts with family paths connoted by migrations and intermingling. Wars, forced migrations and separations give these stories mobility, i.e. the reconstruction of the family story goes together with reading new life into place of origin, the stages of displacement (often physically written down in the genealogies), and the history of the family home. My informants' narratives do refer to the power of genes, but not in the first instance. These are considered as unstable and inconstant. Genes come and go, appearing and disappearing, just like *these strong and tough genes, 'te geny ruskie'*, which manage to resurface—despite several generations of intermingling—in the Russian features of Joanna, 9 years old. Genes passed on both by the male and female, swirling around and scattering like confetti, become a metaphor for mobility and inconstancy. They show that something is being produced somewhere, in a process that does not stem from chance, but from the latent and the ineluctable.

The issues of continuity through blood ties and the unpredictability of genes tend to promote tension between the genders, between continuity and change, between Poles and foreigners (often Russians, Tartars, Ukrainians or Germans), between Catholics, Jews and Orthodox Christians. Mobility here is not simply geographical, it also invades the linguistic and religious affiliations in a country where, as Hanna says when telling the story of her grandmother: *in the same village there would be the parish church, an orthodox church and a synagogue standing close together.*

Memory as a Technique of the Body

According to Skultans, “during the early 1990s, there was an intense identification between personal narratives of the body and the grand narratives of history” (2007: 7). However, memories are expressed not only through words but also through the body and the senses: “Senses often remember what everybody else has forgotten” (Marks as cited in Lankauskas 2006: 45).

The senses of taste, smell, hearing and sight do indeed all play their part in bringing back memories buried deep in the mind, but the memory producing these reminiscences is not exclusively individual, it is also intensely socialized. Sensory inputs will suddenly come into play; they are mnemonic markers, anchor points which memories of past events attach themselves to: the taste of bread and chocolate, which for Halina, 70 years old, will forever be associated with the arrival of the Americans; dusk, which for Magda, 30 years old, recalls the curfew and the martial law of 1981, *Ambrozja* ice-cream, which Elżbieta associates with the communist era, not without regrets. These memory-induced attachments are connected with material contexts in which a sensory culture is constructed. My informants’ kitchens, for example: these are marked by their very own sensory quality, and “mould” bodies and persons differently; they also produce reminiscences and forms of memory transmission of different sensory orders.

As Lankauskas pertinently demonstrates in his study on Lithuania, the visual perception of reminiscences is different from that of the other senses. He gives the example of the Grutas open-air museum where statues from the Soviet era celebrating the victory of socialism are now displayed. Today, these statues evoke past suffering and injustice, giving rise to negative criticism of the Soviet occupation. In contrast to this, the food items on sale in the museum cafe have a distinct nostalgic flavor: *Nostalgija* borscht, *Goodbye youth!* meatballs and *Remembering* cranberry juice, for example, recall memories associated with everyday life and friendly, family sociability under Soviet rule. This “memory through taste” also takes visitors back to their childhood and lets other identity elements, of a biographical and generational nature, resurface. The two “corporeal ways” of remembering—through sight and taste—“though they share a common temporal reference, do not act in synesthesia, which means that their relationship is not one of complementarity or reciprocal reinforcement. On the contrary, their relationship is one of tension, conflict, discord” (ibidem, p. 63).

I find this divide again in the sensory register through which my informants talked about past events, World War II and the immediate post-war era in particular. Their visual accounts very often refer to destroyed buildings, rubble-strewn streets, Soviet soldiers, and queues to get food. A sound matrix on the other hand often gives another depth and consistency to memories and produces other matrices of recognition. Period songs, the titles of which are unknown or forgotten, and which people used to listen to at dances in the country areas or sing with their family, are mentioned in testimonies and are a case in point.

The description 50 year-old Iwona gives of the post-war era brings two memory types into play. There is first her account of how hard it was for people to fend

for themselves, especially when it came to finding food in a time of shortage. Her stories about her mother, interwoven with anecdotes on the patriotic tradition of the family home, are both examples of the good Polish citizen and of the model wife: managing the household, keeping siblings under the same roof or at least close together, taking care of the children and grandchildren, passing on the memory of past events and safeguarding the line of descent through the hard task of satisfying material needs. *Mom kept on saying 'don't forget what happened, even when you think you are poor or miserable, remember the times when we didn't have anything to eat.'* *Even during the communist era, when we had to wait in queues for a whole day to get some meat or whatever, she would always find a solution and say over and over again 'it could be worse, one of these days, we could be deprived of all this'.* *How this rings true now, sometimes I think about my mom and say to myself: 'She got it all'.* Then she recalls certain sounds: the sounds of a house, which at dusk would fill up with friends who would meet to sing, the Russian songs of her maternal aunts and uncles, her father playing the guitar, or the piano echoing in an empty living-room. The dominant figure in the memories evoked here is the mother, but this mother is essentially a voice, a voice Iwona claims she hears again through her own voice and which makes her mother's presence so tangible, even though she is no longer alive: *All this chit-chat, always chattering...you know what I am thinking of, right? My sister says I have exactly the same character as my mother, even the same voice, and sometimes it surprises me. All of a sudden, I see what my sister means and sit down, I take a look at myself and I can see my mother's face, I can see my mother, I listen to myself saying the same things she used to say, and the children do the same, but I can't blame them!*

From what Iwona says, the characteristics linking her with her mother are closely related to both practical skills—knowing how to make a meal from nothing, for example—and similarity of voice and speech patterns. But, as this latter example shows, any breaks in routine or relaxing of bodily tension add visibility to these memory “performances” both for the social player *and* for the researcher. Memory transmission in such instances is implicit and, as such, can go undetected: it can therefore only be properly recognized through observation of routine, not through formal interviews.

Hanna, 27 years old, repeatedly talks about the suffering and constant regrets of her grandmother, who suffered forced migrations from Lwów to Lublin, Bydgoszcz and Gdańsk, before finally arriving in Szczecin. The sound matrix of remembrance in her interviews sometimes gives intimacy and sociability to past experiences, or an ironic, amused distancing of self from nostalgia for an idealized country: *I remember an amusing situation, my grandmother was sitting with her sister watching television and words in Ukrainian were pronounced in the show they were watching. They both laughed because they could not remember anything, what this or that word meant, and they kept on searching for their meaning, which they would finally find, but they could not get the word itself. And while they were having fun, memories of the past came back to them.* At other times culinary techniques would be evoked, as if these were skills that carried all the weight of the family's chequered past from which a particular situation could

be brought to mind: in this instance, her student days when she had little money and experienced moments of intense sociability.

The evocation of these practical skills, passed on from one generation to another with their multiplicity of implied meanings, results in diverging memories. Each and every one of these experiences sheds light on the past in a different way: in Iwona's story, collected in 2002, there are at the same time criticisms of the socialist era and a fear for the future where everything is possible. The rich language of the senses, too, is a means for bringing together not only biographical facts and collective memory but nostalgia for the past and distress over the past, certainties of the past and the uncertainty of the present, ideology and life experiences.

Reminiscences are like the strands of a ball of wool, which, as they unravel, mark out the contours of individual and community identities; the one feeds on the other in this game of plural identifications. It is interesting to note that the informants who know their family history best are also those who used to be told most about past facts and who talk very elaborately about family resemblances, indicating that family memory is built up from both the twists and turns of history and the integrated knowledge of family members (as Sawisz and Szacka pointed out in the 1990s; see also Szacka, 2006). Social agents remember, repeat and "invent" the past to give themselves and others identity: sensory memory and corporeal signs are a pivotal resource in the construction of the self and of others.

If "the exercise of memory is a practical exercise that requires concrete mnemonic means and the whole repertoire of symbols that is associated with them" (Lankauskas 2006), then we can rightly consider memory as a technique of the body, in the sense that Marcel Mauss gave to the concept: "an action which is effective and traditional (...) a physio-psycho-sociological assemblage of a series of actions constructed by and for social authority" (1993: 371).

Conclusion: Changing Bodies, Changing Memories?

This article aims to draw attention to the importance of the body in the shaping of personal, family and national memories, and in the process of giving meaning to history and making it understandable, even in its contradictions. This art of memory based on corporeal involvement constitutes in my approach "a technology of the self, which allows individuals to perform, by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, minds, thoughts, behaviors and way of life, so as to transform themselves (...) or to maintain, fix, modify their identity" (Foucault 1988: 18).

The body represents a map on which to read affiliations, especially in those families where migrations, deportations, or wars have led people to be uprooted and doubt their origins. In Nancy Huston's novel, *Fault Lines*, the little girl kidnapped by the Nazis and adopted by a German family, intrigued by her origins, anxiously wonders: *who gave me my beauty spot? [...] who gave me my voice?* (2006: 420–421). In the case of the families I have met, similar questioning is not such a feverish, personal search for

origins; it surfaces sporadically as a social exercise of recognition and identification. This reading of corporeal traces has nothing to do with anxiety; rather it gives rise to multiple stories on family and collective identity.

Corporeal aptitudes evolve over time and therefore allow multiple readings of the past. Jula's mother declares that she is proud of her 9 year-old daughter's Russian features. My landlord, aged 47, justifies her daily workout by the need to build an "armor" of muscles, *an iron body, like a Russian woman*. The glorification of the Eastern legacy was unthinkable during the Popular Republic era; it emerged with the post-communist society in a double movement: opposition to an imported model and the resolve to be true to oneself. The body is a tool for expressing rejection or demands: a person's claim to individuality dictates the refusal to give in to standardization as much as it dictates demands for the liberty to differ from the main models—mostly foreign.

Corporeal traces are not fixed once and for all: the narratives are forever being rewritten as changes in the polysemous body and political, economic and as social changes occur as the years go by. The iterative structure here is of family narratives that reshape family history in a spiraling motion, with each repetition of the story allowing for the addition of new details, as in Daniel Mendelsohn's brilliant novel *The Lost* (2007). The body is also a sensorium that allows for a revivification of past facts, giving them life and the possibility to be shared. These processes arise from practical and sensitizing relays which give fresh life to and transmit memory: images, gestures, voices, smells but also objects, and material environments. Memory thus constitutes, like other bodily experiences, "a complex modality of attachment to the world" (Hennion 2005: 5), where the modes of transmission influence its contents, as illustrated by the asymmetry between sound and visual memories. These differences facilitate the expression of the ambiguity of reality, and its complexity.² The concept of embodiment, breaking a simplistic and essentialist view of individual and collective identity, then contributes to a more dynamic, performative and inter-subjective understanding of memory.

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² Experiences of the body and material culture allow us to understand the whole series of "segmentations" in memory, related to age, gender, generation, geographical origin and family path. I cannot develop this point here, even though it is a key question.

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