**Introduction**

**The “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre**

The “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre is a local government cultural institution operating in Lublin. Thanks to its location, the Grodzka Gate, leading to the destroyed Jewish Town, the employers of the theatre embarked on a voyage of discovery, salvaging the Memory of this incredible place. The theatre became similar to an “Ark of Memory” in which old photographs, documents and memories are constantly gathered. In the programme realised by our institution great emphasis is put particularly on the historical and symbolic significance of the Grodzka Gate, a former passageway from the Christian to the Jewish Town, which has continued to serve its function of a meeting point between religions and cultures. In the surroundings of the Gate, the space left by the former Jewish Quarter, the NN Theatre has and continues to hold many artistic events exploring the memory of the past while mourning the victims of the Holocaust.

**The empty space left by the Jewish Town**

The great space on one side of the Gate – where the Castle stands – is the area of the former Jewish Quarter. In 1939, among the 120,000 citizens of Lublin there were nearly 43,000 Jews. During WWII the Jewish citizens of Lublin were murdered by the Nazis and the Jewish district destroyed. On commencing our work at the Grodzka Gate in the early 1990s we knew nothing of the history of the Lublin Jews. We were not even aware that the enormous, empty space on the one side of the Gate hides the story of the Jewish Town with its houses, synagogues and streets; we knew nothing of the Gate leading to a non-existent Jewish Town. A big part of this terrain still remains covered with the concrete shell of a parking lot, under which, together with the foundations of the former Jewish buildings, the memory of their inhabitants is concealed.

**Memory and Responsibility**

It was then – at the very onset of our activity – that we had to face a weighty decision as to what should the meaning of the NN Theatre's accidental location be next to the empty space left by the Jewish Town. A space which came into being only after its former Jewish occupants had been murdered and their district razed to the ground. It seemed to us something deeply immoral to create a cultural institution in a place so unusual and not to refer to it in some special way. In effect, our presence in this place, the Grodzka Gate, has come to mean for us a taking on of responsibility for the Memory of the now non-existent Jewish Town of Lublin and the terrible fact of its annihilation. In his statements, Czesław Miłosz repeatedly emphasised that what is left after the Shoah is the “sullied, blood-stained, desecrated” soil. Commenting on the thoughts of Miłosz, Jan Błoński in his famous essay entitled *The Poor Poles look at the Ghetto writes*:

“(…) blood has remained on the walls, the soil soaked up blood, whether we want it or not. Our memory and our very selves are also soaked up with this blood. So we must cleanse ourselves, and this means we must see ourselves in the light of truth. Without such an insight, our home, our soil, we ourselves, will remain tainted. This is […] the message of our poet. [This blood] calls for remembrance, prayer, and justice. (…) That collective memory which finds its purest voice in poetry and literature cannot forget this bloody and hideous defilement. It cannot pretend that it never occurred. (…) The desecration of Polish soil occurred and we have not yet discharged our duty of seeking expiation. In this graveyard, the only way to achieve this is to face up to our duty of viewing our past truthfully”.

[The translation comes from the book *The Grodzka Gate – Circles of Memory* *by Tomasz Pietrasiewicz, published by the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre (Ed. Aleksandra Zińczuk, Lublin, 2008).]*

**Empathy and Memory**

In the Gate, in the activities carried out here, a symbolical Polish-Jewish meeting space is created – a ground for discussing the past and making the future. Jews who come here often ask us: “Why do you do this? After all, you are not Jewish. You are Poles and the Jewish town is not your history”. Poles often ask: “Why do you do this? After all, you are Poles and the Jewish town is not our history. Or maybe you are Jewish?” We explain patiently that this, in fact, is our common, Polish-Jewish history. To remember the murdered Jews you do not have to be Jewish. To remember the murdered Poles you do not have to be Polish. The world we live in needs more Gates like ours. It is thanks to places like these that – in keeping with the Jewish idea of *Tikkun olam* (“healing the world”) – we indeed make it better. The difficult process of disclosing the memory of the Jewish Town of Lublin demonstrates how tightly the life of each community is bound with the process of remembering the past. It is easy to beautify our own history and thus perceive it from one point of view. However, mythologizing the past without a critical insight can become a treacherous tool generating future conflicts. This is why the contemporary world – so diverse and so deeply divided – we have to show more empathy, compassion and the ability to understand others. In Lublin, such an understanding especially embraces the memory of its Jewish inhabitants murdered during the Holocaust.

**“Remember us”**

In their accounts, many historical witnesses recall that victims led to death would often shout: “Remember us!” The perpetrators of the Holocaust wanted to throw the mass murdered Jews into the chasms of oblivion, to erase every single trace of their existence and thus render them entirely anonymous (NN). That is why most victims of the Holocaust are faceless to this very day and their names still remain unknown. Our work is to try and reconstruct their fates (saving them from oblivion) and retrieve the victims’ names. It is exactly the “NNs” who are of greatest importance to us, because they often have no one to keep them in mind.

**Theatre of Memory at the NN Theatre**

The very name of the institution: “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre, points to its theatrical origins. Indeed, it all takes its beginning in the NN Theatre, which started its activity on the premises of the Grodzka Gate in 1992. It very quickly turned out, however, that the language of the theatre confronted with the dramatic story of the Gate and its surroundings often made it seem too commonplace, overwhelmed as it was by history. This situation forced us to seek a new form of expression – both for the institution in the making (the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre) as well as for the cultural and artistic performances realised here. Because of our relationship with the theatre, we began to think of the area of the Grodzka Gate as a “theatre stage”. On the way to finding a new means of expression, memory was our most significant point of reference. It gave rise to the Theatre of Memory at the NN Theatre.

**Theatralisation of space within the Grodzka Gate**

This peculiar process of the “theatralisation” of the space at our disposal entailed the introduction of various objects bearing traits of theatrical scenography. In this manner, a specific type of “Theatre of Memory” was given life in the Grodzka Gate with its own configuration of symbols, metaphors and props. As a consequence, several scenographic exhibitions were designed, giving shape to the “Theatre of Memory”: *Portrait of the Place* (1999), *Memory of the Shoah* (2008), *Lights in the Darkness – Righteous Among the Nations* (2008), *Lublin. Memory of the Place* (2010), *Lublin. 43 Thousand* (2015). Every new exhibition was rooted in its predecessor. More and more space inside the Gate was annexed for the needs of the exhibition. Some of these exhibitions: *Memory of the Shoah* (2008), *Lights in the Darkness – Righteous Among the Nations* (2008), can be viewed as art installations.

The first exhibition in the Gate to tell the story of the Jewish Town – already in the form of the “Theatre of Memory” – was *Portrait of the Place* (1999). It was precisely then that the original object in terms of theatrical scenography was placed here, the so-called “Memory Machine”. Until today it remains one of the fundamental elements of the existing exhibition. “Memory Machine” was designed as an integral part of the scenography of the place, “entwining” every corridor and room of the Gate, and so binding them into one.

The next exhibition – *Memory of the Shoah* (2008) commemorated the annihilation of the Jewish Town of Lublin. It began where the story of the pre-war Jewish Town ended – through creating a detailed model of the old district. These two parts of the exhibition – one telling the story of the life in the Jewish Quarter and the other referring to its destruction – are separated with a door frame bearing the mark of an empty mezuzah space.

The exhibition *Lights in the Darkness – Righteous Among the Nations* (2008) was created in the whitewashed interiors of the attic which contrast with the adjoining black space of the exhibition on the Holocaust. The Righteous, saving Jews at the risk of their own lives, served to counteract the otherwise ever-present evil. What such individuals did is visualised as a ray of light in the depths of a terrible darkness – hence the name of this exposition.

The exhibition *Lublin. Memory of the Place* (2010) was designed as an interior of an archive. It was meant to emphasise the fact that the Gate has become the “Ark of Memory” where photographs, documents and memories are constantly being salvaged. A further elaboration on this exhibition is a project called *Lublin. 43 Thousand* (2015). It manifests itself in the space of the exhibition with thousands of files, each one assigned to a specific inhabitant of the Jewish Town.

**The Surroundings of the Grodzka Gate – “Mysteries of Memory”**

The vast empty space left by the Jewish Town just outside the Grodzka Gate is filled with rich symbolism connected with Memory and the Shoah. It has become the space in which the NN Theatrerealised many para-theatrical performances – Mysteries of Memory – the nature of which refers to the medieval genre of 'mystery plays'. The characteristic trait of these plays was for the witnesses of the events staged to take active part in the performance of the particular mystery. Mysteries of Memory are meant to create an emotional connection between their participants and the dramatic events of the past, keeping the memory of the murdered inhabitants of the Jewish Town alive. The first two Mysteries of Memory were performed in the year 2000. *One Land – Two Temples* was organised in the space surrounding the Grodzka Gate and *The Day of Five Prayers* was held on the premises of the former concentration camp at Majdanek. In later years, other Mysteries of Memory were staged in the urban space surrounding the Gate: *Poem of the Place* (2002, 2004), *Mystery of Light and Darkness* (every year since 2002), *Memory of the Righteous – Memory of Light* (2008).

**Other “Mysteries of Memory”**

The Mystery of Memory *Letters to the Ghetto* took place in 2001, its dramaturgy based on the act of writing letters to the inhabitants of the former Jewish Town and sending them to their long-gone addresses. In this case, the Mystery of Memory was no longer thought of as a para-theatrical performance with the city space as its “stage”. The written word is an artistic means used also in the Mysteries of Memory called *Letters to Henio* which are held annually since 2005, as well as in the so-called *Narratives* (*Dopisane Losy)*. The participants of these mysteries rooted in the written word, in which the very act of writing is a symbolic undertaking, become also their creators. In effect, the mysteries gain an additional educational dimension.

Mysteries of Memory relating to the spoken word (oral history) are yet another form of these mysteries, two of which were held on the premises of the Centre – in the Grodzka Gate. One of them, *Salvaged Stories*, took place in 2012 and the other, *Salvaged Stories – Witnesses*, in 2013.

What is more, two Mysteries of Memory in the form of literary-musical performances were also held in the Gate: *Lublin. Memory of the Holocaust* (oratorio) and *Tales from the Night* (cantata).

In 2015 we began the realisation of a particularly unique Mystery of Memory called *Lublin. 43 Thousand*. This mystery is not bound by any spatial or temporal framework, but rather enacted through the spectator’s very own exploration of the archives in search of documents referring to the murdered inhabitants of the Jewish Town. All of the activities included in this process of inquiry serve as a symbolic act of saving the memory of those who perished in the Holocaust.