**Metaphors and symbols of the “Theatre of Memory” in the Grodzka Gate**

It is of significant importance to look at the activities of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre through the perspective of metaphors and symbols used to describe what we do. Among them you will find: the Gate of Memory, the Ark of Memory, the Archive, the Time Capsule and many others. Each of these expressions describes the Gate in its own manner.

The Gate – a meeting point

The most essential trait of the Grodzka Gate's location is the fact that it is positioned on the border of two different worlds: the Christian and the Jewish Town. This means, however, that the Gate is also the boundary where they meet. For this reason, the first important metaphor the NN Theatre referred to in its curriculum was the Gate as a symbolic meeting point for Poles and Jews. The Mystery of Memory *One Land – Two Temples* is the artistic expression of the idea because it was then that the emblematic encounter was held between those who survived the Holocaust and those who strove to save them – the Righteous.

The Gate is also symbolically the meeting ground for the shared Memory of those who perished in the Shoah. Symbolically, it is the place of gathering for both the living and the murdered – hence the title *The Mystery of Light and Darkness*.

“The Gate of Memory”

The other metaphor we started to apply was in terms of seeing the Gate as the “Gate of Memory”, that is the place leading deep into the Memory of the city, the place in which the Jewish Town is still remembered. It was then that we started to think about ourselves as the “wardens of Memory” – meaning those who guard the Memory of the non-existent Jewish Quarter.

Thus the annihilated Jewish Town is transformed into the “Jewish Atlantis” for us, a clear and binding reference to the myth of the sunken continent. For many years part of the *Lublin. Memory of the Place* exhibition at the Grodzka Gate was the symbolic entrance into the space of the “Jewish Atlantis” via an enlarged pre-war map of the Jewish Town painted on the floor.

Memory – Place – Presence / Responsibility

When as members of the NN Theatre we were striving to come up with the programme of our activities in the Grodzka Gate, we wanted to bring our key ideas to the foreground by placing them in its very name – Memory – Place – Presence. These words had symbolically become synonymous with the three axes around which the curriculum of the NN Theatre events was beginning to form.

Memory pertained to the Jews living next to us in Lublin for hundreds of years, later to be murdered in the Holocaust. Place meant the Grodzka Gate, also called the Jewish Gate, a site particularly significant for the full understanding of the history of Lublin. On its one side the Christian Town was situated and on the other – the Jewish Town.

And our Presence in this place – the Grodzka Gate – stands for taking Responsibility for remembering the murdered Jews, who co-created the story of our city.

The symbolic expression of the above is the mirror we hung on the wall as part of our exposition. It is placed exactly opposite one of the windows in the Grodzka Gate through which the empty space left by the houses and streets of the Jewish Town can be seen. In a natural way, the image reflected in the mirror becomes part of our exhibition, an element of our story. It emphasises the fact that being the hosts of the Gate we take responsibility for the Memory of the now non-existent town outside.

“Ark of Memory”

One more metaphor, directly alluding to the Biblical deluge and Noah's Ark, refers to the Gate as the “Ark of Memory”. In this way, the Gate is transformed into a place which preserves the Memory of the Jewish Town in the time of its obliteration. The Gate, like the ark, or a time capsule, is here to help Memory survive, ensuring its transportation into the future.

“The Great Book of the City”

The metaphor of the “Great Book” dates back to 1997, to the period of preparation for an exhibition devoted to pre-war Polish-Jewish Lublin. It was then that we started to see the history of our city as a book, with the stories of single people, families and places inscribed in it. For this reason, the above-mentioned exhibition was called *The Great Book of the City*. It was later – together with a different exhibition – that the metaphor of the “Great Book” returned as an element of our scenography, in the form of pages from a manuscript. It was to signify that entering the space of the exhibition itself means the simultaneous stepping into the interior of a Book opening up in front of us – the Memorial (Yizkor) Book which tells the story of the life and destruction of the Lublin Jewish Town.

Working on *The Great Book of the City* exhibition, the programme of “Oral History” was born – an idea which enshrines the recording of the various memories of the inhabitants of our city. It was then that the great, multi-threaded *Oral Book of the City – Lublin Told* was created, through the telling of hundreds of “little stories”.

Adopting history – saving Memory

The metaphor of “adopting history” is an expression of the symbolism of the “Oral History” recordings. Using it, we want to emphasise that the registration of memories becomes a specific moral commitment towards the witnesses of history – we do it to ensure that the bequeathed stories will be safe and will remain alive. Thus, we become the 'keepers' of stories. In a sense we perform a symbolic act of “adopting Memory” in such moments. Such acts, symbolically experienced, are realised also during the mysteries of Memory when the witnesses of history are recorded in the space of the Gate which is open to visitors.

Memory Lab

Looking for various ways of addressing memory we also began to perceive the activities of the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre as a “laboratory of Memory”. The very notion of laboratory implies seeking for things, experimenting and discovering the new. We give it expression through the interdisciplinary nature of our Centre, created, as it is, on the crossroads between various activities: scientific, museal, documentary, educational, artistic, and cultural animation.

“Memory Animators”

In the process of saving the memory of the murdered inhabitants of the Jewish Town we have turned into peculiar kinds of “animators of Memory”. We are those who point to history as a transmitter of experience significant also in the present world. An “Animator of Memory” is a type of translator “transferring” (in Latin *translatio* means “to transfer”) the knowledge of what happened in the past into the present times; someone who demonstrates that the experience conveyed by history is still important. “Animators of Memory” strive to give life to the past events and shed light on them. This is precisely why in their work they often apply the language of art and animation – in which our mysteries of Memory have their origin.

On the other end of our continuum of activities lie the so-called “reconstructors of history” who do not translate stories, they re-enact them, because the world we live in is in need of our empathy, compassion and understanding. Here in Lublin this means protecting the memory of the lost Jewish population.

“Lamplighters of Memory”

In trying to shed light on past events, striving to have a clearer view and understanding of them, we have also taken on the role of the “lamplighters of Memory”. The symbol of what we try to attain is the “Lamp of Memory” switched on during one of the mysteries of Memory in the area of the former Jewish Town.

Saving Memory – looking for traces of those who perished

Delving into the darkness – searching for things that survived and can still be salvaged – pictures, memories, objects – we are protecting the Memory of the inhabitants of the Jewish Town.

Deep down we fight to continue the work started by the creators of the Ringelblum Archive documenting the Holocaust. They described what they witnessed with the acute awareness of imminent death, submerged, as they were, in the very heart of the fire (the Shoah).

We come from a generation born on the smoking ashes left by WWII. We were brought up by those who experienced the fire and survived it, burnt but alive. For a long time we were unaware of the fact that the post-war site of conflagration contains the ashes of the Jews murdered and burned, and that there are witnesses of the Holocaust alive still. These were the very last moments for us to reach them and record their stories.

Our followers will get to know only us – who had the opportunity to communicate with the witnesses of history. We are the last link between the ones who experienced the Shoah and those who will find information about it from books, films and the Internet only.

The Guardian Mole

Looking for the traces of those who perished, trying to save the memory of each and every one of them, we have turned into “guardian moles”, as with the poem by Czesław Miłosz, delving into the darkness “w*ith small red lamps fastened to our foreheads”:*

*Slowly, boring a tunnel, a guardian mole makes his way,*

*With a small red lamp fastened to his forehead.*

*He touches buried bodies, counts them, pushes on,*

*He distinguishes human ashes by their luminous vapor,*

*The ashes of each man by a different part of the spectrum*.

[Czesław Miłosz, “A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto”]

On the basis of archival documents, containing the names of the Jewish Town inhabitants, we struggle to reconstruct their individual stories.

Afterimages – the traces of existence

In the memories concerning the former inhabitants of the Jewish Town we also come across merely obscure traces of someone’s existence. Such memories do not introduce any new, complete stories. They are akin to barely visible marks of people’s pre-war lives – often the only remaining ones.

This also includes photographs, especially those taken in the street, portraying people who have come into the picture frame accidentally. We “cut out” such images from the photographs – even the poorly visible ones (blurred, faces obscure, etc.) and give the people they represent individual files, too.

The Gate as an “Orphanage”

When the Jewish Town disappeared together with its inhabitants, it was all very quickly forgotten. The abandoned stories of individual people became “homeless”. These “orphaned” tales – outcasts of our memory – were far from being interesting to anyone for a very long time. Seemingly, there was no one who wanted to remember them. Not until, that is, they were gathered by us in the Gate and spoken of again. Not until we gave them a “second life”.

In a unique way, our Centre – by allowing the stories in – has become an “Orphanage” for memories. The history of Jewish children has a particular place among them, for it belongs to the children whose presence accompanied us here in the Gate from the moment we began our work. For a long time none of us dared to look at the Gate as a symbolic “Orphanage”. We had to grow in order to face such senseless and numbing loss.