

Revisiting Otwock. 22.01.2020

I've decided to go to Otwock with my mother who grew up there and whose family has at least 4 generations backwards been bound with this city. My mother does not like the city, she always would say that the fact that she met my father and moved with him to Warsaw (located not far from Otwock anyways), has given her a chance to develop as a person and find fulfilment in life. In Otwock she says, she always felt like she did not belong.

From the morning we discuss the plan for the day, I tell her what is important for me to take photographs of what addresses to visit. I told her I also would like to get in contact with an artist that lives there, one of the most important contemporary sculptors in Poland. My mother, not familiar with his work, starts to search for the exact address of the studio and comes across an article in which he describes his memories of growing up in Otwock. She reads it and says full of amazement that "he gave an exact impression of what I felt about this place in this interview". They both used to live in the same district of the city, around 600 meters from each other, attended the same primary school, probably the same church. He talks about how the city has lost its identity and the glorious past as the sanatorium resort in the 60s was already something no one could notice. For him memories from childhood that influenced his identity as an artist were associated with bizarre places such as for example the cemetery. Surprisingly, I also remember the cemetery as one of the most important places in Otwock, from visiting my grandparents as a child. Every time, we would spend a day at their house, all meals we had and all activities were just ways to kill time before the most important event of the day - a trip to the cemetery where we could pay a visit to our ancestors. My grandmother said to me once: you cannot burn your body, after your death - a grave is like a small house, we have after we pass away, so others have a place to visit.

In Otwock, a bit further from the christian cemetery there is a jewish one, hidden in the woods. It's atmosphere is completely opposite to the vivid rumble of the one that my grandparents are buried in. There are no lights there, no visitors. No paths or alleys. Just singular grave stones sticking out of the meadow greenery. We will not have time to visit this place this time, deciding to go there during the spring.

To get to Otwock from Warsaw it takes between 25 and 50 minutes, depending on the means of transportation. As we leave city borders of Warsaw, gradually the greenery changes and becomes more and more dominated by pine tree forests, a characteristic that for me is the most memorable from Otwock's landscape. At the same time it is undeniably beautiful and sadly nostalgic. Also the repetition of trees, images so alike to each other passing by as we drive through them, creates short moments when I feel like we have been in the car for a long time, reaching a very distant location.

The city center of Otwock is simply ugly. It is hard for me to find more exact, and less disappointing words to describe it. All houses and public buildings, completely not matching each other. Unfinished investments, big commercial banners, generic shops, the marketplace that is made out of metal barracks, chaotic signs. And somewhere in this mess, from time to time we find a beautiful old wooden house. They are usually not preserved in a good shape, but even so, they seem the most valuable elements of the whole architectural tissue. Even though in decay, one can simply acknowledge how splendid they must have appeared some time ago.

Next to the street where the most of the wooden houses have been kept, so called "the church street", stands the ruin of Willa Julia. A neo-gothic brick building, that among others as an owner, had one of the doctors that were working in Zofiówka in the early 20's, Gotlieb Kremer. Even though the building is listed, its appearance shows that there is no one to take care of it. Same as some of the other buildings that remained after the annihilation of the Jews. The ruins of sanatorium Zofiówka are located not very far from the main train station, less than 5 minutes by car, maybe around 15-20 if you walk. Escaping the chaotic center of the city, we dive into a dark dense forest, passing some more wooden houses hidden between the pines.

Grandmothers Flowers, 10.02.2020

After my grandfather's death, the interior of the house has changed, but maybe only on a superficial level. Plenty of flowers collected or bought by my grandmother started filling up the vases. They were so colorful and kitsch, it almost made the place look surreal. But as a kid, I loved the flowers. I would play with them, changing the compositions in vases.

My grandmother did not want to modify anything in the house for very long after her husband's death. All his clothes stayed in the closets, she even kept medicine jars, with his name on the paper tag, remaining in drawers of the side table of his bed. Only the flowers were new, and postcards of the places we were visiting. She stopped traveling after he passed away, she would only visit us or my uncle's house. When I asked her why she did not want to even go to a mountain sanatorium, they both spent a few holidays at, she answered that it would ruin the last good memories she had of him and take away the beauty of the best moments she remembered. Also, she was afraid of leaving the house, she wanted it to be the last place she would see before dying.

The first change that she decided to make in the house, maybe after 10 years of living there alone, was to repaint the room she would spend the most time in - the first living room as we would call it. Of course, she assigned me to take care of this job. So I agreed to come to her during my spring break, during my second year of studies. And due to this stay at her house, I got to know, first elements of the past of the house.

The paint that was covering the walls was glue-based paint, a popular product in the 70s that turned out to be my curse. When I started to ground the wall for painting, the old paint would wash away while rubbing it with a wet cloth. I learned that the only way to put a new layer of paint on a wall like this was to take off the glue-based paint and then when reaching the surface that won't dissolve in water, put the new layer. From planned 2 days of painting, the whole process exceeded a week, involving intense washing away the paint with hot wet towels. It also resulted in a discovery that has been to me, similar to the ecstatic discoveries of archeologists in historical movies.

Under 3 layers of yellow paint, I found a painting. It was at the top, where the wall meets the ceiling. The band of painted flowers running around the whole room. The ornament was very geometric and looked old. I would suppose that it somehow resembled the pre-war graphic, art deco-ish decorations. After taking off all of the paint we waited a day for the surface to dry out. It's funny how I say it in a manner that includes my grandmother in this process, even though she just observed everything I was doing, from time to time cynically laughing out of the fact that she got me into doing it. This was so characteristic of her character, she was incredibly kind and then from time to time, she would say something that revealed her ironic humor. It was also ironic how after this big discovery, almost without sentiments, I repainted the room as she wanted me to. The big revelation got hidden again. Me and her were the only spectators, the only ones in our family that bear that memory.

When I stayed then at my grandmother's house, just because I anticipated being there for only two days the only entertainment I took with myself was a movie, Cloud Atlas. I remember watching it 3 or 4 times in bed before going to sleep. It's interesting how somehow the movie was similar to what I was experiencing, the rediscovery from the past that shapes understanding of the present. The memory that reoccurs to become a drive that shapes the future. That was the time I discovered that the house, despite my assumptions, was dated from before the war. Later I decided to learn much more about the house and Otwocks' Jewish history.

The cherry stones, 20.03.2020

When I think of the time I spent at my grandmother's house before she had her accident and I started living with her every second weekend, I see only shredded fragments of memories. The gestures, the moment pauses in our daily activities. Or some kind of specific rituals, repeated every time I went there.

The oldest memory, I think, will be when I'm very little, maybe even from before my grandfather passed away (I was 6). We're in the kitchen, my mother sits by the table and speaks with my grandmother who peels the vegetables for the soup. Men, my father, my grandfather and my uncle are in the living room or outside, talking about things I do not understand. They smoke cigarettes and pipe, the smell is awful. Kitchen is my refuge, where everything is simple and has order. Where the smell of cake mixes with the steam that comes out of the soup. I sit there watching my mom and her mother talk. And then my mother starts searching in the cabinets. She's looking for her favourite cherries in sugar, for the kompot. But there are none left.

What happens now, still amazes me today, since it was the one and only time I have ever been to the space I will describe. My grandmother pulls up one small carpet, then the linoleum floor, and a small door in the floor shows. It's an entrance to the underground cellar. I beg for permission to follow my mother inside in search for more jars of the cherries and jams. Secured by my mother's hands, I go down the ladder, carefully. The cellar is quite dark, but it is not gray, it's brown. There are shelves standing in a row, surrounding the long narrow space. Some shelves are completely empty, on some there are old newspapers stacked. The place looks a bit like no one has come here in a long time.

I stand in between the light and my grandmother watching me from above, and my mother walking further inside to look for the jars. She's searching for the one with the last year's date, they all have handwritten tags. This place is an archive of summer evening hours spent by my grandmother preparing the jams and kompots. Mom passes me the big jars, full of small squishy cherries. They are not as bright in colour as the ones we have in our garden or the ones we buy in the market. They are pale, like the colour has faded away, but the liquid around them is as dark red as blood. I pass the jars up, into my grandmother's hands. When my mother says, we should leave, I ask her if I can take a look inside, she lets me but only for a second. I feel fear mixed with excitement. I walk further into this cabinet of curiosities, with old jars with cucumbers, parikas and fruit. Some jars have dust on them, they are completely forgotten, probably not any more edible. When I crawl out on to the kitchen floor, I can already recognise a new smell that has joined the previous ones. It's the cherries juice mixed with hot water on the stove. The pot will only stay there for a second, since it is better not to let it boil.

My grandmother fishes out a few cherries and puts them on a plate that she gives to my mom. She is happy, like a small child, I can see it in her eyes. We sit together and eat the cherries, splitting the stones into dark glasses. Soon we will go eat with all the other members of the family. Before I set the table, I have to go into the corner of the plot and throw out the organic leftovers into the compost heap. As I walk there slowly in the sun, I wonder, what are the other secret spaces in the house? I wonder what objects are hidden there and what stories they tell about my grandparents.

Whitening of the tree trunks. 06.04. 2020

When I was born, my parents bought land in the suburbs of Warsaw where they planned to build a house. They had no money at that time to realise this idea. We moved there when my brother was born, 8 years later.

This first year, in 1994 when they got the land my father decided to dedicate half of the plot to a small orchard with a variety of trees. He got the cuttings from local orchard owners, choosing special types of plums and apples, the ones which taste he found best. I don't remember knowing about our land, until we started building a house out there.

Through these 8 years, he would go there alone and take care of the fruit trees. He would whiten their trunks with lime paint, to protect them from spring intense sun and early winter cold. If not protected, the plant's pine breaks and creates wounds. I remember, the first time he took me and my mom to the site and we together painted the trees. He introduced me to every single tree, told me where he got it from and what kind of fruit it will give in the summer.

I remember early mornings in the summer when we would go pick up the fruit, that we would eat for breakfast. I remember seasons when we had so many peaches we made jam for all of our relatives, 30 or 40 jars of jam. Two cherry trees grew so big and strong we expanded a hammock between them. I could lie in their shadow on hot summer days, reading, listening to music and playing with my brother. At the end of our street there was a big orchard with more than 300 small cherry trees. When I was around 13, the owners decided to cut all of them and turn the land into another agricultural production. I remember how sad I was seeing all the trees being cut and taken away. All that was left was a large brown soil surface and one big cherry tree, next to the border of the plot. The atmosphere of emptiness, enhanced by this solitary big tree was quite overwhelming.

I remember that it was at that time I decided to visit this tree, to keep it company. I would go there to read, to sit on its big branches to climb up and observe the surrounding space from another perspective. I don't know if the tree has gained anything from it, but I definitely felt like in its branches I have found my own refuge. Space where no one else would go, where my parents couldn't reach me, where there were sweet cherries I could eat endlessly.

After my parents got divorced and my father moved to the city, the orchard in our garden started falling into decay. No one whitened the trunks any more, no one sprinkled the blooming flowers with herbal extracts. The cherries would have a lot of fruits, but always there would be worms inside. No one would collect the infected cherries, they would fall on the ground and we would clean the grass with rakes in the late summer.

Our little garden never got back to its best shape it had when my father was taking care of it. The jams, the sweetness of fruits is only a memory. The smell of leaves shining green in the summer sun, the sound of the branches moved by the gentle wind. What I would'n give to be in this garden now.

My grandmother rarely entered the second room in her house. But she did like to locate visitors there. Also, when they would come to stay, she did not like to disturb them. The room had only one entrance, in comparison to the first living room where she was residing most of her time, apart from being in the kitchen, that had 3 doors, later 4 each on one of the walls. That automatically made the second room more private, a quality of a space my grandmother never sought for, as she was a very social person.

It was not only the room she avoided, she also almost never opened the doors or drawers of the closet and wall unit on the opposite wall to the entrance. She mainly used that room as a storage, a backstage to the first room. That created perfect circumstances for me to study my family's past in this room, but also to remain unexposed with my discoveries. Only from time to time, she would call me from the kitchen, saying - "there is nothing interesting there, I'm telling you - leave the room alone". Even though she was not persistent in her demand for me to leave the room, it would always make me hesitant to continue the research, therefore I never really penetrated the room and what it was hiding at once. All memories of stories that are hidden there are fragmented.

It all started from explorations of the outside of the cabinets. I was asking questions about objects visible on the display shelves. Why do you have an old big mushroom dried out, standing on the shelf, gran? When did you take this photo? What were you doing in Chicago? Whose bust sculpture is that? Who is Piłsudski? I quickly run out of questions about the few objects displayed on the shelves. That pushed me to explore the library part of the wall unit. The problem was, I wasn't that good at reading when I was 5.

The only book that my mom recommended was her first ABC-book from the early 70's. It was beautiful with hand painted drawings and I could clearly see my mom reacted differently to this object than the others. I think she is a person who is quite nostalgic about her old belongings. She lately mentioned that she still remembers what she bought for her first salary - an electric sewing machine, we still have in our house. My grandma also kept for her handmade notebook with perfected recipes, she has written down on a typewriter, during lunch breaks in her first office job. So the grandparents' house, apart from many objects owned by my grandmother, had also some secretly hidden childhood souvenirs of my moms.

I remember to this day, my favourite poem from this book I made my mother read to me endless amounts of times. Written by one of the most famous Polish authors of the early 20th century, Julian Tuwim, tells a story about a black boy who misbehaves in the time he has after school, in a simple way allowing the reader to empathize with the character and when it ends with words "what a pity that Bambo clever and funny, is not here to make the weather warm and sunny", I always wondered how would it be to play with him together. Lately I got to know that Tuwim's mother, Adela, was one of the victims of the liquidation of Żofiówka and Jewish ghetto in Otwock.

I would say that maybe that was the first clue to start questioning the house's past, but who would have guessed back then? There were so many talented authors with Jewish roots among established Polish writers of the early 20th century. So many of them, who survived the war kept on writing and shaping the larger understanding of experiences of Holocaust. Many of them died in concentration camps, some like my childhood favourite, Janusz Korczak, even though given a chance to leave, decided to stay and face death with his co-workers and proteges.

School trips, 23.04.2020

We would go for many short and longer trips from the school. At some point I signed up to the voluntary club of „enthusiasts of Warsaw” in primary school. We would go on walks with the history teacher, during weekends and she would show us the city, tell us city myths and legends. I always found them so interesting, repeating them to my mom after getting home. The city myths always bear some universal truth. Some deeper message. Even when they were all quite unreal, as for example the one about the symbol of the city Warsaw- a Siren who supposedly lived a long time ago in the river Vistula.

But this one was not a voluntary trip. We took it as a class, actually I think we visited Treblinka on our way to the lake destination we were having our school break vacation at. We arrived with the bus in front of the museum and the camp itself. I asked the teacher what was this stop we were taking and she answered, calmly we are visiting a former death camp.

I think at that moment I realised, or remembered from the classes what death camps were, what was in the museum. I've heard stories about thousands of shoes kept in one room, all sizes and types. About hair in cabinets. About letters and names of these thousands of people who were exterminated. And all these images, I have not seen but I could imagine made me scared. Made me scared I will not bear to see this place, knowing its past. I asked the teacher if it would be ok if I stayed in the bus, she tried to convince me but eventually agreed. I promised her to come back there when I am older. In the meantime all other kids gathered in front of the bus waiting to go visit the site. And then I saw my best friend returning to the bus. Tom came back because he said he felt sad to leave me alone with that sad face expression he saw from the outside of the window.

He sat next to me and we watched the class enter the camp. They came back after half an hour, they had just superficially gone through the whole land, as we had not much time to stay there. The plan was to get rest in the green surroundings of the actual campsite by the lakes. All the kids took their seats and I was sitting in silence waiting to hear what they will say to each other about the place. If they mention the shoes, if they mention the horror hidden behind walls. But I think the place and experience did not impact them as I thought it would. They got back to the topics they discussed before, maybe someone mentioned how they were impressed by the size of the whole site and its emptiness.

In highschool we went on a similar trip to the other part of Poland, near Białystok. There is a city there, one of the rare historical Jewish cities that have survived. It is a bit of a museum itself. We visited a synagogue there with a guide. In one of the glass boxes I noticed something I have seen before. Silver candle holders. Exactly the same looking ones we had standing on our fireplace in our house in the suburbs of Warsaw. My mom brought them from my grandparents house a few years back, they were really nice and I thought they matched our home, although we had little old things there.

I asked my mother about them. Where did my grandparents get them from, and she said that actually she has found them as a child herself. A few years ago she did not remember where exactly. But lately the memory came to her, because of the ceramic classes she attended. She remembered that she found them in mud under the porch of the house. This reminded her that the house that is now covered in brick used to be wooden. Turns out my grandparents house used to be a small version of Świdermajer and my grandfather covered it with grey brick at the beginning of the 70s. It all started coming together into one picture. When we went to the Otwock museum, my mom got to know for the first time - that the house was within the borders of the Jewish ghetto in Otwock.

The marks and rituals of healing , 04.05.2019

When I was small I used to ask my mother about all the marks she has on her body. The scars on her hands and wrists. Long cut mark on her wrist, she has because she stumbled on the pavement in front of my grandparents house, while carrying home glass bottles with milk they would deliver to everyone in the neighborhood in the morning. The other one was a burn mark she had, that was a memory of the element of my grandparents house I have never seen myself. A big fire chimney that was standing in between all 4 rooms of the house. It was used to heat up the rooms, as well as for cooking in the kitchen.

I remember seeing that kind of old chimney in another house I visited as a kid. It was an old house of my father's aunt, that was standing in the middle of nowhere. We went there once, after a memorial for my grandfather and uncle who were buried in the nearby cemetery. The nicest part of this, quite crude interior was a part of the ceramic stove that resembled a bench. You could sit on the side of the stove and appreciate the heat that was distributed under the seat. Observe the cooking food, boiling water for tea.

The marks we live with on our bodies tell stories. Some tell more traumatic experiences than the others. Prisoners of Death Camps were initially given numbers, tattooed on their arms. Even if they survived the Holocaust, they were left with this unpleasant mark for the rest of their life's. The mark was reminding them about the camp every day, reminding them of their strength and luck that allowed them to survive.

Other marks connected with body and rituals, are the ones my grandmother made on the threshold between the two rooms in her house. Every time her grandchildren would visit, she would ask them to stand against the threshold with a book on their head and she would mark their height. She did the same for her children when they were little. Then we would compare, who was growing faster, me or my mother, my cousins or my uncle. The marks became layers of historical information, of very little importance to anyone but us.

Every time I would visit my grandmother in the last years of her life, we would go together through stacks of papers and bills. In the kitchen cabinet she had saved all the letters that were coming in from the institutions, banks and the city, clipped together with confirmations of payments in case there was a mistake made and she had to prove something. After she got sick she would just put them randomly into the cabinets, and I was segregating them in order afterwards. She was also having a case in court, with her sister, according to some land they inherited after their parents. So sometimes, we would spend an hour or two looking for an exact document that she was asked to send to the court.

During one of these searches, I found by mistake a letter that my mother wrote to her parents from her first scout trip. The letter amazed me from the moment I started reading it, because it was so different from anything I have written ever as a child. The letter spoke of no emotions, no excitement was there. It was constructed as an assembly of lists of activities and very precise descriptions of places. My mother mentions the exact time they got to the campsite, what were the hours of activities and how many kids were there with her. How many groups were they divided into, how every group is divided into rooms, how many beds are in each room. When she speaks about the city they stay near to, she compares its size of Otrock, the city she knows well. When she describes the day they spend at the bank of the local river, she describes with unusual precision - I went to the water 3 times, 10 minutes each time with 20 minute breaks in between. This is also the only moment of the letter she says something non-analytical, something she's proud of. She tanned the most out of all kids, as if she accomplished the goal she was sent for to the camp in the first place. When I read this letter now, after I've got to know about the theory of rhythmanalysis I find it brilliant, but I still don't understand why she wrote it in that way. Maybe that was her way of understanding the events in her life? The precise measurements she was conducting, were speaking of the importance of every single element of the whole picture?

Yesterday I asked her why the letter was written in this way. She said they made everyone write the letters to their parents, at least two pages, something she had little interest in doing. She wanted to as quickly as possible return to fun activities with other children. She decided that this efficient way would be the best compromise between making her parents calm about her wellbeing and reaching the 2 page limit without problems. Emotionless describing, became her way of resistance, of harmless rebellion.

The familiar historical evidence , 10.05.2019

As I go through archive materials, more images from my grandmother's house return to me. The images that bring the associations are old photos of the Jewish citizens of the city. Kids using the public water pump, two Jewish boys helping each other. I remember the pump my grandmother had in her courtyard. I was asked to use it every time we would take care of her flowers in the front of the house. I remembered also that, if I wanted to wash hands in the stream I would have to ask one of the adults to help me pump the water, because the water would quickly stop running after the movement of the handle was neglected. My mom says that when she was a kid, there was no need for such cooperation. But with passage of time, the water soaked into deeper layers of the ground, maybe the geological layers moved down, and getting the water out required more effort. This could be seen as an allegory of a memory that fades away with time, soaks deeper and with every passing year it's harder to bring it about. What is required to bring it about is collaboration between people.

The longer I investigate the city's past, the more I understand the bizarre objects in my grandmother's house. Or at least, I think I do. The burst of Piłsudski is maybe connected with the colonies that his wife was organizing just above my site, in the forest next to Zofiówka sanatorium. A palm she had in her living room, came back to my memory because of an archive leaflet with photos of interiors of one of the sanatoriums, that had tropical plants inside and also during the summer outside. That was seen as a very luxurious element of the decoration, speaking of the prestige of the guesthouse. My mother said that she remembers palms in all houses of her aunts. Similarly to the guest houses, which one of them had the most of them would consider her house the most glamorous one.

Were these objects there in place to guide me towards this problematic and this project? Or am I romanticizing the past, in order to try to understand an uncertain future? Is reality driving my destiny, or am I in charge of it? This unanswered question, hounding people since the ancient times, will have to remain unanswered. What I know is that this house was far more real than any other house or apartment I lived in after. The heaviness of the object, the coldness of walls, the smells that soaked into the sheets and fabric curtains hanging by the windows. All these sensory elements and this stillness of the past, made this house so real. My loving grandmother made this house real and important. Taking care of the house and the garden when she was sick, allowed me to be present. There, sitting in the sun, again taking a break from daily activities. On the bench, where I used to come join my mother during her breaks when we visited the house, since I remembered.

This bench was a reminiscence of the porch that was turned into a room during the renovation that my grandfather conducted in the 70's. The wooden porch, located on the southern side of the house, used to have a bench running along the edge. The porches were the most recognisable element of the Świdermajer style, the place where the patients with respiratory diseases could use sunbathing and fresh air in a horizontal position.

The bench is still there, the house stands. I haven't been there since I moved out of Poland, and not even when my grandmother passed away. She died in a hospital, in a very sterile room, with life support instruments attached to her lungs, keeping the blood flowing in a body with a brain damaged by the stroke. What will I feel when I return to this house? Am I ready to go there and face its emptiness? Am I ready to go through all the objects and documents when we will decide what to give away, throw out and keep. What objects will I keep to preserve memories? And which ones will fade away into oblivion.

