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A study of the relationship between mother and daughter in Bożena Keff’s “Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie” [“A Piece on Mother and Motherland”]¹

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Anna Kuchta

Since the end of the Second World War and afterwards, when the postwar generation started to share their experiences and stories about the war, numerous works concerning the topic of postmemory – whether explicitly or not – have been published². And as Anka Grupińska states, the ones involved in the dialogue about the Holocaust are more and more often the children of the Holocaust survivors rather than the survivors themselves³. Among those works, Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie [A Piece on Mother and Motherland], written by Bożena Keff and published in 2008, is undoubtedly exceptional and provides insight into the mechanisms and consequences of transgenerational transmission of trauma.

In her work Bożena Keff addresses her struggle as a representative of the second generation but mostly she focuses on personal issues, her troubled relationship with her mother, and the pain and emotions surrounding it. It is often a challenge for the members of the second generation – so called “generation after” or “children of

¹ The following article is a part of “Obrazy tożsamości kulturowej w kontekście zjawiska postpamięci...” research project and was supported by the Jagiellonian University DSC fund for young scholars (Faculty of Philosophy of the Jagiellonian University, 2015).
survivors”⁵ – to present their own stories, as their experiences, emotions, and memories are tainted with the shadows of their parents’ trauma and postmemory. As explained by Marianne Hirsch in her book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, “postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory”⁶ which “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth. Whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated”.⁷

The impact of the trauma and its consequences have been so severe that through the first generation – the ones that experienced it directly and empirically – it reaches their children as well. While postmemory cannot be equated to memory, as Hirsch explains, “it approximates memory in its affective force”⁸ and thus, the children of the trauma survivors once again experience the pain transmitted from their parents. “Holocaust still continues, in various forms”⁹, states Keff, and this never-ending continuity makes it impossible for the representatives of the second generation to free themselves from the history they received from their parents.

The memory of the Holocaust has not faded with the passing of the generation that personally witnessed its atrocities. As the writings of the next generation reveal, these memories have been transmitted, often silently and unconsciously, from the survivors to their children,¹⁰ explains further Karein Goertz in her article on the mechanisms of trauma transmission. Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie [A Piece on Mother and Motherland] is an excellent example of the persistence of the Holocaust trauma and its impact on family relations. As noted by Izabela Filipiak and Maria Janion in *Afterword* to Keff’s publication, the author had chosen a challenging subject, as she addresses not only the tragedy of the Holocaust, but also decided to describe the relationship with her

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⁷ Ibidem, p. 22. In the same chapter Hirsch explains that while she developed the notion of postmemory in regards to the children of Holocaust survivors, it “may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences” and she addresses the reason she decided to use the term “postmemory” rather than other terms to define memory of the second generation.
mother, which itself is a very “risky task”\textsuperscript{11}. It is both socially disapproved and sacrilegious to argue with one’s mother, explain Filipiak and Janion, especially since the titular Mother – a Polish Jew and the Holocaust survivor – is “a carrier of personal trauma as well as the of the trauma of her nation”\textsuperscript{12}. Putting family relations in the centre of the story is not uncommon for the works created by representatives of the second generation, as essentially family is the origin of their inherited trauma and postmemory they experience.

It is not a coincidence when Keff herself admits that Art Spiegelman’s \textit{Maus}\textsuperscript{13} – a world-famous work concerning the topic of postmemory in the context of the relationships within survivor’s family – was an important benchmark and inspiration for creating her own story. Thus, it may be worth pointing out that Spiegelman’s and Keff’s works bear certain interesting similarities. Just as Spiegelman’s graphic novel focuses on the relationship between father and son\textsuperscript{14}, Keff’s book focuses on the bond between mother and daughter. Moreover, both \textit{Maus} and \textit{Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie [A Piece on Mother and Motherland]} tell the story of the Holocaust and trauma transmission using a unique form – Spiegelman, being a cartoonist, delivers his story in a form of a comic\textsuperscript{15}, while Keff chooses to title her own work simply a “piece” which does not make it easy to categorize it. “What kind of genre is it – a piece? Is it an opera or an oratorio? (…) Or maybe a new genre has been created – a narrative poem inspired by an opera?”\textsuperscript{16}, a question Filipiak and Janion ask in their Afterword. \textit{Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie [A Piece on Mother and Motherland]}. The piece is divided into eight parts and an epilogue and focuses on a relationship between the two main characters – the Mother (also referred as Meter\textsuperscript{17}) and the Daughter (often called Usia, sometimes Kora or Persefona\textsuperscript{18}). Their dialogues are accompanied by a chorus and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Filipiak, Izabela, Janion, Maria. “Zmagania z Matką i Ojczyzną.” \textit{Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie}. Ed. Bożena Keff, Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2008, p. 81.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibidem.
\item \textsuperscript{14} For further reading see: Hirsch, Marianne. \textit{Family frames}, op. cit., pp. 31–40 where she addresses the absence of mother figure in Art Spiegelman’s work.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Filipiak, Izabela, Janion, Maria, op. cit., p. 82. It is a word pointing that Aleksandra Szczepan also chooses to refer to \textit{Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie} as “a narrative poem” in her study of Keff’s work. Cf. Szczepan, Aleksandra. “Rozrachunki z postpamięcią.” \textit{Od pamięci biodziedziczonej do postpamięci}. Ed. Teresa Szostek, Roma Sendyka, Ryszard Nycz, Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2013, p. 326.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Keff, Bożena. \textit{Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie}, op. cit., p. 59.
\item \textsuperscript{18} The nicknames “Usia”, “Kora”, “Persefona”, and “Meter” come from the names Demeter and Persephone (also called Kore), archetypical mother and daughter from the Greek mythology. However, instead of copying the names, Keff uses nicknames and diminutives which – as Filipiak and Janion put it – symbolize that the myth has been trivialized. The daughter’s name is especially important to analyze, as she is no longer Kore – just Usia, which is not only hypocrism from the name Kore (in Polish: Kora-Korusia-Usia) but also sounds significantly close to the Polish word “uszy” (“ears”), which is a metaphor of her position in the mother-daughter relationship. Cf. Filipiak, Izabela, Janion, Maria, op. cit., p. 85. Additionally, the nickname “Usia” rhymes with Polish word “cór...
parts attributed to the Narrator who explains the situation and often provides additional context or shares historical details of the events referenced in the conversations between Meter and Usia.

Keff intentionally crosses the borders of typical literary genres and styles – she refers to the theatre of ancient Greece (e.g. uses choral interludes explaining or commenting on the relationship between the mother and daughter) but uses a very modern language (“language is fully mine creation”) and setting. Moreover, just as the author does not limit her work to traditional literary genres and styles, she is also approaching the subject of Holocaust in a different, often shocking or intentionally provocative way. She concentrates on painful subjects, such as war and trauma, but she does it with irony, mockery, and sarcasm, she does not avoid foul language, slurs and vulgarisms (“choke you egoistic blind moron rapist cunt”, “fuck you, hyena”), and mixes grievous historical topics with numerous pop-cultural references (Lara Croft, Alien). Thus, her work is not easy to define and tends to create more questions rather than explain the situation of the second generation or general mechanisms of postmemory. However, perhaps it was not the author’s intention to explain, to give definite and unambiguous answers, to find certain and final solutions. She focuses rather on portraying the family trauma she experienced and on delivering her story the way it is – shattered, unfinished, “shot through with holes”. She describes her own feelings, fears and thoughts, her own unique experiences. Even though postmemory, as pointed out by Marianne Hirsch, manifests itself through common behaviour of the “generation after”, each and every situation is different and Keff’s personal approach allows insight in the relationship between the mother and the daughter and shows the consequences of trauma transmission in the context of trauma survivor’s family.

Despite the aforementioned similarities between Keff’s and Spiegelman’s works, it is worth pointing out that the main focus of Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie [A Piece on Mother and Motherland] shows also a noticeable difference between them. Subtitling Maus with “My father bleeds history” Spiegelman stresses that the storyline presented in his graphic novel belongs to the father, Vladek, a Holocaust survivor,

(being a hypocrism of the word “daughter”), a play on words Keff explores in her work. Cf. Keff, Bożena. Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie, p. 20.

19 E. g. Ibidem, p. 36.
20 Eadem, Na znak lojalności ze sobą, op. cit., p. 113.
21 Eadem, Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie, op. cit., p. 47.
23 Ibidem, pp. 40–41.
24 Ibidem, p. 16
26 I borrow this phrase from Henri Raczymow who describes the narrative of the second generation as “memory shot through with holes”, due to the fact that memories inherited from their parents often lack continuity which – together with the gap in family history – tend to generate more questions than answers. Cf. Raczymow, Henri. “Memory Shot Through With Holes.” Yale French Studies. No. 85: Discourses of Jewish Identity in Twentieth-Century France, 1994, p. 64.
27 Spiegelman, Art, op. cit.
not Art, *porte parole* of the author and a person from the “generation after”. Art, being “true to both his father’s story and his own experience of it”\(^{28}\), serves as a medium. He helps his father deliver his tale and unravel the memory of war, and at the same time he illustrates “the event of its transmission”\(^{29}\) to him, the very process of postmemory being formed. “The testimony is contained in Vladek’s voice, but we receive both more and less than that voice: we receive Art’s graphic interpretation of Vladek’s narrative”\(^{30}\), explains Hirsch. Through Art, who becomes a prisoner of transmitted memories, the reader learns the story of Vladek and, simultaneously, observes the mechanisms of postmemory. Keff’s approach is different, as she aimed to create a story that focuses not on the Holocaust survivor, but on the representative of the second generation, someone who was brought up by a person who experienced the trauma. Unlike *Maus*, Keff’s work does not provide detailed storyline about her mother’s experiences during the war and Holocaust, rather, it focuses on their aftermath and portrays the daughter trying to fight with the narrative she has already inherited.

In the case of Keff, *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie* [*A Piece on Mother and Motherland*] both concentrates on and constitutes a part of her personality and her autobiographical work as “a kind of declaration of her identity”\(^{31}\), explains Aleksandra Szczepan. Using the character of Usia as her *porte parole*, Keff delivers her story and shares the experience of growing up as a daughter of the Holocaust survivor. The entire “narrative space”\(^{32}\) is being constantly expropriated by the mother, explain Filipiak and Janion, yet the emotions portrayed by the author belong to the daughter. Meter is “constantly talking about it [her life] and about the pain she experienced”\(^{33}\), and thus she transmits her own trauma to her daughter. As Keff diagnoses, the mother is, in the essence, “a victim of the war and the Holocaust, even though she survived”\(^{34}\), as she has never moved on from the trauma she experienced. She stayed in the past and constantly kept reliving her “eternal”\(^{35}\) pain, her “tragic life”\(^{36}\), to the point that it seems accurate to call it “a cult of her own suffering”\(^{37}\). In the words of Anna Janko, another representative of the “generation after”, whose mother survived the massacre of Sochy village (1st June 1943), the trauma of the war and the Holocaust.

\(^{28}\) Young, James, op. cit., p. 671.
\(^{29}\) Ibidem, p. 670.
\(^{31}\) Szczepan, Aleksandra, op. cit., p. 32.
\(^{32}\) Filipiak, Izabela, Janion, Maria, op. cit., p. 83.
\(^{33}\) Ibidem.
\(^{34}\) Keff, Bożena, *Na znak lojalności ze sobą*, op. cit., p. 114.
\(^{35}\) Eadem, *Opowieść o Matce i Ojczyźnie*, op. cit., p. 9. Using the adjective “eternal”, Keff emphasizes the fact that both for the mother and – through transmission – for the daughter it seems impossible to imagine a world without war trauma. The same adjective Keff uses to describe Mother’s grievance, stressing that it is not only the pain that surrounds the Mother and the Daughter – it is also the endless, one-sided transmission of the traumatic memories.
\(^{37}\) Ibidem, p. 110.
“never disappears, not even at the equator at high noon”38. Thus, it is not surprising that in comparison to her mother’s pain, Keff’s own experiences or feelings may seem irrelevant, they become displaced or disappear under the shadows of past tragedy.

As Filipiak and Janion explain, “through the mother, who survived the Holocaust, the daughter continues to live somehow in times of war and ravage”39, and post-memory keeps overwhelming Keff’s own narrative and emotions. Portraying the situation of the second generation, Henri Raczymow notes that a child of the Holocaust survivor is in extremely difficult position as she or he is not “a victim, survivor or a witness”40 of the trauma themselves, yet she or he feels burdened with the parent’s memories and experiences similar emotions. As a consequence, such people feel constant and “overwhelming desire to write”41 yet at the same time they think that they have “nothing to say”42 or even that it is not their place to speak on behalf of those who suffered the trauma of the war. As Raczymow explains:

My question was not “how to speak” but “by what right could I speak,” I who was not a victim, survivor, or witness. To ask, “By what right could I speak,” implies the answer, “I have no right to speak.”43

In Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie [A Piece on Mother and Motherland] Keff portrays similar struggle, the search for her own identity and her attempts to free herself from the mother’s story. Filipiak and Janion call explicitly the mother’s narrative “an invasion”44 on the territory of the daughter who needs to defend her rights not only as a person participating in the family dialogue, but as a person with her own narrative. Despite the fact that Keff inherited the trauma of war and Holocaust, she is essentially excluded from the suffering, excluded from everything that “is important for her mother”45 and – according to Meter – she has no right to feel the pain or to fully participate in the dialogue. As Meter states:

If your life was as tragic as mine
Perhaps I could sometimes talk with you like with someone
Who has license to exist
But you do not know the suffering, free from pain, from the essence of life,46

39 Filipiak, Izabela, Janion, Maria, op. cit., p. 89.
40 Raczymow, Henri, op. cit., p. 98.
41 Ibidem.
42 Ibidem.
43 Ibidem, p. 102.
44 Filipiak, Izabela, Janion, Maria, op. cit., p. 85.
45 Ibidem, p. 84.
46 Keff, Bożena, Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie, op. cit., p. 58.
In the eyes of the mother, the daughter is not only not allowed to experience any kind of pain – she refuses to see her suffering just as she refuses to see her as a person (“Will mommy ever notice me?”47) – but she is also deprived of the essence of life. For the Mother, Usia has virtually no connection with her family history: “You Share Nothing with Nothing”48, Meter says and Keff emphasizes her reproach with the usage of capital letters and the repetition of the word “nothing”. She has no past and, in consequence, no future (“there is no future for me here and there is no past”49), no identity, no roots and no importance – thus, she is not allowed to participate in the dialogue actively, she should just focus on listening.

Similar observation is noted by Mikołaj Grynberg in his collection of narrative interviews with people brought up by Holocaust survivors titled Oskarżam Auschwitz. Opowieści rodzinne [I Blame Auschwitz, Family Tales]. Grynberg’s respondents often mention an overwhelming feeling of insignificance they experience comparing their own lives with their parents’ stories (“About me? Nothing important. I was not the one to survive the war”50, “How could I possibly tell my parents that something happened that makes me unable to get up and go to school, university or to work? Do you know what happened to them? And somehow they were able, right?”51). Representatives of the second generation often feel the need to compare their lives to their parents’ experiences and – obviously – they have no chance of winning such a strange competition.

Usia also feels insignificant, moreover, she is being perpetually reminded of her lack of importance by her own mother. Keff emphasizes the issue comparing Usia to an illusion or a fog52 which shows that her experiences are not considered real as they cannot compete with what her Mother suffered through. Instead of having her own narrative and being a legitimate and full-fledged participant of the conversation, Usia is reduced to a pair of ears (“Oh, my beautiful daughter […] Two Good Ears”53, “Mother calls the daughter every single day […] It is about the Ear.”54) and – with little regard of her own feelings or needs – forced to listen to the mother who talks “too much”55 because she lived through “too much”56. Using ear as a pars pro toto of the daughter is significant because it shows, in a metaphorical yet blunt way, that Usia is not a person, she is simply an unwilling listener. It is not a coincidence that it is the word “Ear”, not the word “daughter”, that Keff writes with capital letter, stressing the fact that in the eyes of Meter Usia’s importance and her role in the conversation

47 Ibidem, p. 47.
48 Ibidem, p. 58.
51 Ibidem, p. 100.
52 Keff, Bożena, Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie, op. cit., p. 47.
53 Ibidem, p. 36.
54 Ibidem, p. 52.
55 Ibidem, p. 61.
56 Ibidem.
depends solely on her ability to listen. The daughter wants to free herself from her mother’s narrative, but at the same time she feels pressured by guilt to keep listening, to be there for her mother, to keep receiving her story and her trauma. She wants to speak, but she feels that for Meter her words bear no meaning (“Finally she realizes, it is all about the Ear […] not about what she says”\(^{57}\)). Once again, such emotions and behaviour correspond well with common features of postmemory and shows similarities with cases analysed in Grynberg’s *Oskarżam Auschwitz. Opowieści rodzinne* [*I Blame Auschwitz. Family Tales*]. People interviewed by Grynberg describe similar experiences and the need to live their parents’ memories and the constant guilt that does not allow them to create their own narratives (“I had no right not to listen when they were telling me about that times”\(^{58}\), “I was born in this, not any other home, and whether I wanted it or not, I got involved in all this”\(^{59}\)).

*Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie* [*A Piece on Mother and Motherland*] portrays Usia’s struggle for freedom of speech and thought, her fight for creating her own narrative. It is a metaphorical journey of a woman who is growing up. She starts as a daughter – the listener – and gradually frees herself from her mother’s power and begins to tell her own story:

> The daughter pretends to listen, because the mother needs to keep grinding (…) One day the daughter gets an idea. She puts the phone away and once every ten minutes she picks up the phone and randomly says “yeah” or “sure”\(^{60}\).

The knowledge that she does not have to listen actively to Meter’s story allows Usia to distance herself from her mother’s words and memories. She “frees herself and does not free herself”\(^{61}\), states Keff paradoxically. It is not possible for Usia to “free herself from the history”\(^{62}\), just as it is impossible to escape family ties (“I took my general direction after my parents”\(^{63}\), she states). However, as Keff’s story proves, it is possible to learn how distance oneself from the inherited memories and the trauma and create her own narrative.

\(^{57}\) Ibidem. It is worth adding that in her work Keff also uses a metaphor of “acoustic cabin” which shows that Usia is meant to receive the voice of her Mother and to carry that voice further. Ibidem, p. 19.

\(^{58}\) Grynberg, Mikołaj, op. cit., p. 296.


\(^{60}\) Keff, Bożena. *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie*, op. cit., p. 52.


\(^{62}\) Ibidem, p. 112.

\(^{63}\) Ibidem, *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie*, op. cit., p. 72.
If there will soon be few left with personal experience of the Holocaust, it is high time to ask what kind of memory is being handed down and what kind of the post-Holocaust Jewish identity it is helping to create,\(^{64}\)
suggested Efraim Sicher in his article about the post-Holocaust narratives. Keff, indirectly, seems to give an answer to his question, as her work is both an evidence of the past tragedy and its consequences on the family relations and the autobiography of a representative of the second generation, a person growing up in the shadows of postmemory, struggling for a release from the burden of inherited memories. Usia is forever unable to “gain autonomy in the eyes of her mother”\(^{65}\), yet she realizes she can create her own autonomy and thus regain the narrative space expropriated previously by Meter. Despite the fact that she took her general direction after the previous generation, she realizes that she has a different narrative, a different story to tell, one she “does not know they would recognize”\(^{66}\).

Freening herself from her mother’s memories, the daughter is finally able to address her own identity, which is much more than simply being a daughter of the Holocaust survivor. Usia is the daughter of her mother, but she also speaks as a representative of the generation after – as a Jew\(^{67}\) and Jewish woman\(^{68}\) living in her motherland, 21\(^{st}\) century Poland, which is another main “character” of Keff’s work. The relationship between the daughter and her motherland portrayed in *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie* [A Piece on Mother and Motherland] is becoming more and more important towards the end of Keff’s work. It is necessary to point out that postmemory always has a national context and thus, it has different qualities in different countries. In Poland the case is extremely complicated due to the situation of Jews after Second World War (the lack of Jewish communities, repatriations, anti-Jewish riots under Communist regime\(^{69}\)), who were often forced to either leave Poland or hide their identity and continue to suffer in silence, which often “serves as a perpetuation of [the story] tyranny”\(^{70}\). While the complex motherland-centred narrative in Keff’s work should be a matter of separate study, it is worth stating that the author

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\(^{65}\) Filipiak, Izabela, Janion, Maria, op. cit., p. 98.

\(^{66}\) Eadem, p. 72.


\(^{68}\) While this is not the subject of the following article, it is worth mentioning that Keff points to interesting similarities between Jewish narrative and feminist narrative, as both Jews and women share history of discrimination and oppression. See: Keff, Bożena, *Na znak lojalności ze sobą*, op. cit., p. 106.

\(^{69}\) E.g. Kielce pogrom of 1946.

\(^{70}\) Laub, Dori. “An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival.” *Testimony: crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*. Ed. Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, New York: Taylor & Francis, 1992, p. 79. Laub addresses the issue of the impact of suffering in silence on survivor’s lives and explains that the untold stories of ten “more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life”.
Anna Kuchta, *In the clutches of (post)memory. A study of the relationship…*

constitutes her own identity in opposition to both mother’s and motherland’s oppressive narratives. Despite her mother’s words, in the process of creating her narrative Usia realizes that she is not excluded from the past – both in terms of the history of the country and in terms of family roots – neither is she deprived of the future. Most importantly, she has the presence and she wants to speak, she “wants to Demand access to the History,” as she phrases once again, stressing important words with capital letters, from the narrative she involuntarily received. In *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie [A Piece on Mother and Motherland]* Keff speaks both on behalf of her mother and herself and she shows that while representatives of the second generation carry the burden of traumatic memories inherited from their parents, they also have their own stories to tell and those stories contribute to the discourse on the Holocaust and its consequences.

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72 Keff, Bożena, *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie*, op. cit., p. 56.  
73 Ibidem.


**SUMMARY**

The article focuses on the issue of postmemory (a term by M. Hirsch) and transgenerational trauma transmission basing on *Utwór o Matce i Ojczyźnie [A Piece on Mother and Motherland]* (published in 2008) written by Bożena Keff, the daughter of Holocaust survivor. The main aim is to present the consequences of postmemory and trauma transmission in the context of the relationships within survivor’s family, mainly: the relationship between a mother and a daughter. Analysing the topics of transmitted memories and their consequences, the author provides a theoretical background referencing, among others, the thought of M. Hirsch and K. Goertz.