Disturbingly Familiar

by Giselle Beiguelman

Text narrated by the artist during the installation *Quanto Pesa Uma Nuvem? (How Much Does a Cloud Weigh?)*, commissioned by *Culture.PL*, as part of the Polish culture in Brazil 2016 program, presented by Videobrasil at Galpão VB, June 25th-August 20th, 2016.

I arrived in Poland without any mental images.
Landing in Warsaw, I discovered that I was entering into neither a black hole nor a blank white page of sorts, but into a gray area; a land without narratives.

My only reference was one memory, from when I was 9 years old, of my grandma Sonia, in winter, the snow covering her legs up to her thighs. My mother told me how she missed the flowers of her city, Przemyśl, and that there had been an apple tree in the orchard.

I take that back. There was one more memory. My father used to tell the story of his great-aunt, who wore her veil while sunbathing during the brief summer in Deblin/Irena, terrifying all the children of the *shtetl*. She lived to be over 100 years old. And every morning she fasted, drinking a bowl of aquavit...

And that was all that I knew, or what was left of them.

Mostly what there was were the losses.

This must be why I am so attached to names. I have great difficulty understanding how people don’t associate my name, Beiguelman, with bagels, the famous Jewish bread.

But it surprised me even further when I discovered that my interlocutor didn’t even know what a bagel is!
I became emotional when I saw, in Krakow, the carts selling warm bagels in the streets in the early morning...

Beautiful, medieval, Krakow was named a world heritage site. One of its highlights is the Kazimierz district, which was once a separate city, exclusively for Jews, divided from Krakow by a wall.

It is there that the city's cultural and nightlife take place, in beautiful bars that sell delectable artisanal vodka.

Everything was preserved in Krakow. In the small district of Kazimierz are five synagogues, one of which--the largest and most important--was constructed in the fifteenth century.

It’s as if time had stopped. Out of fear or indifference, I don’t know.

In the city center, the word most often seen is kantor, which means exchange, and is not a tribute to one of its most distinguished artists, Tadeusz Kantor.

In every direction abound offices of travel companies advertising excursions and “tours” of Auschwitz.

The trivialization of memory by the tourism industry remains to be discussed.

But the fact is that names were always very important to me. Perhaps because they are the only thing that remained from the history of my grandparents before they migrated.

Everything else was stolen.

Was Warsaw Joy Division before Joy Division?
I wasn’t prepared to arrive in Warsaw on a lovely sunny day, finding such beautiful autumn light.

Sleepily, in the car, I discovered a city that oscillated between gray and yellow. A cross between the Soviet legacy and sunflowers sprouting in the middle of avenues.

(The other day, I saw sunflowers at a supermarket in São Paulo, and I missed Warsaw. I felt guilty. Can I miss Warsaw?)

On the way to the hotel, I realized that the Poland of my imagination was only snow and a flat expanse.

An incalculable vacant lot in my personal history. Or an empty lot of a personal history that I had without knowing it.

Warsaw is a city of erasures. Rebuilt in the ruins of World War II and in conflict with its past.

Among the skyscrapers that dominate the city center, one stood out. Atop it sits a bright blue light advertising the insurance company MetLife. In that place once stood the old, grand synagogue of Tłomackie Street.

Learning this was a shock. Not in the least for seeing the ruins of the ghetto being recovered and occupied by funky restaurants, stores, and hip cafes, in a process of gentrification in the capital that was borderline violent against memory.

I walked through the streets and saw posters announcing Hebrew lessons. At night, I passed by a synagogue that featured a hut. It was the time of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, one of the most important on the Jewish calendar.
Sukkot is commemorated in October and remembers the 40 years spent in the desert, after the exodus from Egypt. In honor of these nomads, the devout sleep in huts during this time of the year.

To see people inside a hut, in a synagogue, in Warsaw, was unforgottably unsettling.

Because, then, there were still Jews living in Warsaw?! How are they able to? Are they survivors of war or of history?

The few buildings that remain from the ghetto were transformed into affordable housing. They look like slums, informal residences, but they aren’t. To get to know them was disturbing. Disturbing because they are disturbingly familiar.

Something there led me to believe that in those buildings, whose patrimony is now protected by Unesco, my family--I mean, the branch from Warsaw, the Bilards of my grandmother Cecília, originally Zirel Sissel--would have lived.

Was this the Bilards’ home?

Graffiti on the wall that reads, “This is the ghetto!” in Polish and Hebrew, gave me a sudden urge to walk through the streets with a felt yellow star on my arm.

Would anyone notice?

Property status is too confusing in Warsaw. When I visited the Museum of Contemporary Art I knew that they were moving. The building had been claimed by a group of businessmen.

I discovered that this had become common. After the Nazi looting came the long Soviet years and all property came under state ownership. Today it’s this mess. A city where
everyone is potentially the former owner of a place that once belonged to someone else, but no one knows exactly who.

My friend, Marcio Harum, reminded me that the first LP by Joy Division, one of my favorite bands, was called Warsaw.

Joy Division was not yet Joy Division in 1978. They called themselves, on their debut LP, Warsaw.

I was disappointed to learn that the song was a tribute to Rudolf Hess, Hitler’s secretary who attempted to make a secret peace deal with England and was banned from the party, but who nonetheless was convicted at Nuremberg for war crimes.

Love will tear us apart... And Warsaw really was Joy Division before Joy Division.

**Detroit with Botox**

A few days later, I traveled to Lodz (which is actually pronounced Utsch). I went by train, which for me is always extremely unsettling in these countries.

The first time that I crossed Germany by train, going from Oberhausen to Kalsruhe, I had the worst nightmare of my life. The memory of something I did not live through emerges, as if clinging to my DNA. It was no different on this crossing. But there was one thing in particular: I noticed that the clouds in Poland are vertical. Beautiful...

Soothed by this, I could enjoy the scenery.

It hit me that I was in a country that for decades had been part of what we learn in school as the “iron curtain.”
Open fields and houses worthy of a film set, interspersed with huge stone buildings, ruined or simply blown up.

Whatever happened to “Eastern Europe?”

Lodz is a type of textile-industry version of Detroit. A city with countless abandoned warehouses from the early twentieth century, which are slowly being recovered as centers of innovation and design.

It’s incredible, the strength of such creative industries and their ability to reset the past.

One of the essays that I most often cite and use when teaching, Hal Foster’s *Design & Crime*, sounded in my head like a mantra during my eye-opening visit to this city.

Foster says that we now easily purchase not only design, but also the possibility of being “designed.”

For everything, there is a “design.” For a saggy face there is a “surgical designer;” for historical memory, a “museum designer.”

And after I visited, in Lodz, the Art Inkubator, which was preparing a festival--how could it not be?--of design, I could not think of anything other than Foster’s essay.

Proudly presented as a project financed by the city and the European Community, Art Inkubator occupies three buildings of a former factory constructed between the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Much is made of how the project attempted to reconcile the building’s original features with what is more up-to-date.
But it makes no reference whatsoever to the factory’s former owners. I would cut off my
payot (if I had them) if this factory was not owned by a Jew.

Lodz was the second largest Jewish community in Poland, and an important industrial
center. The city was occupied one week after the Germans invaded Poland, in September of
1939.

One hundred and sixty thousand Jews lived there, constituting a third of the population. In
early 1940, they were all confined to a small area of the city.

The memorial to the Jews killed in World War II is there, next to the train station where
Jews and Gypsies were deported to the death camp of Chelmo [Helmo], the first to use the
poisonous gas Ziklon B.

We crossed the city, passing very old wooden houses. We saw huge and tasteless buildings;
remnants of the Soviet era that today seems like a gap in history.

What remained of communism?

At the Memorial, in addition to photos taken by the German army of men, women, and
children engaged in forced labor, one can see the indefinite lists, meticulously and
sickeningly organized, that recorded the names of every prisoner with their personal data.

The technology of Nazi control is unbelievable.

On the way, I saw a wall graffitied with a swastika. When will the past pass?
But, in Lodz, I also came to know the size of my ignorance. At the Museum of Art, it’s unforgettable how I took to Paulo Herkenhoff, gaining access to a world of modern and contemporary art that has not yet reached Brazil.

I was embarrassed to have known so little about Władysław Strzemiński and Polish constructivism.

And I was absolutely captivated by the incredible photographs of Tomasz Tomaszewski, who portrayed Poland and Warsaw like no other.

**Am I from here?**

Ah... Warsaw...

Have you ever been to a place where you felt like you looked like everyone else? Where all the women have the same hair color as you, the same skin color, the same blue in their eyes? For me, this had never before happened.

I usually hate seeing myself in photos, but some of the very few portraits that I like to (re)look at were taken in Warsaw.

Everything seemed to make sense. I, in that place, physically. For the first time, I seemed to be captured in the image.

More than a strangely comfortable setting, disturbingly familiar, to repeat myself, I always felt at home when I sat down at the table.

It was like being back at Grandma Sonia’s house. Everything that I had most liked to eat at her house on weekends I ate **every day** in Poland.
Pierogi, stewed kasha (buckwheat), sour cream with chives...

A party for my palate.

It was difficult to understand that drinking hot tea with soup at lunch, one of my least favorite memories from childhood, is quite common in Poland.

It’s their rice and beans. Everyone does it and no one suffers! But how I suffered with it at Grandma Sonia’s (really, Guitla Zizla, a name that she hated and that I think is a-ma-zing.)

When do ruins become rubble?

We are speaking here, you and I, of a history without traces. The world of an eliminated and immobile time.

Eliminated because it was silenced. Immobile because in many places, especially in smaller cities, it seems that everything is between parentheses and can recommence at any time.

There is a moral, ethical, emotional debt as undeniable as it is nonnegotiable. Only time can ameliorate it.

But will it be able to ease the pain?

It’s impossible not to notice that this is recognized by both parties; I mean: Jews and Poles.

At least with regard to the ethical and emotional debt. How much is understood about the immensity of the pain embedded in this history is difficult to know or measure...

**The Jews are the blacks of Poland and Poland is our Africa.**
It’s true that every city I traveled to, from the largest and most visited by tourists, such as Warsaw and Krakow, to the smaller and less expressive, such as Deblin and Przelmysl, all of them have memorials to the victims of the Nazis.

That is not insignificant. It’s important and I confess that it surprised me. But memorials are not able to rework the past.

In Deblin, I understood what Andreas Huyssen meant when he wrote that the twentieth century was not able to create ruins, only rubble.

Ruins, says Huyssen, have an aura. They are threatening because they bring with them an “oppressive interlacing of the past and present, nature and culture, death and life.”

Rubble is already the remains of what the catastrophes of the twentieth century left us. They are unable to spatialize history and temporalize space.

Deblin is not in ruins; it is rubble.

Today the small city is an aeronautical center, but time there seems to seek the gagging of its own history.

In the years before World War II, 62% of the population of the small city was composed of Jews. Today there are none.

Remaining are the dirt streets, in the area that had been the shtetl and later the ghetto.

In place of the synagogue is a technology store, that kind of “nothing-architecture,” typical of places without a present that denies its past.
I went to the town on a Sunday and saw not a soul on the streets, aside from a poor drunken homeless man who was sleeping in the sun on an abandoned lot.

I have never seen a blue so magical as the sky of Deblin. I don’t know what shade of blue that was. Is there a blue the color of a void?

It was there that my grandfather Rafael, my dear Grandpa Fael, and his brother, the loveable Uncle Schie, grew up.

Only they and their sister Raquel, who went to live in Argentina after a brief stay in Santos, where my grandfather settled, survived.

They migrated shortly after the First World War. Therefore, they did not die.

My great-grandfather Leibz [Leibitz] was the head rabbi there. I do not know which of our ancestors were bagelmakers, from whom I inherited this curious surname—Beiguelman, the man who makes bagels.

There are no bagels in Deblin.

A man who approached us in a lan house showed us where the Gestapo’s headquarters were. A dark house, like everything in that city, that was occupied by someone on a political campaign, as if this fact didn’t bother them.

After walking aimlessly for a few hours through the dirt roads and poor houses of Deblin, and finding nothing about myself and my history, we went to the cemetery.

The cemetery is in a neighboring city, Bobrowniki, a place that seemed to be even poorer and more Catholic than Deblin, inhabited by than less than 1,000 people.
The gate was open, even though it was the holiday season--Sukkot--and this was forbidden by religious law.

The small cemetery was actually an open field, with a few remains of tombstones. During the War, the Nazis plundered the tombs to pave roads with their stones.

The cemetery has only one tomb. In reality, a small memorial.

Reading the headstone, I saw that it was of Chaya Bubis, mother of my father’s second cousin, Ignatz Bubis, who built it in memory of her and all the dead.

**I froze.**

Not because I knew Ignatz Bubis, who my father located for those who didn’t know him, in the 1990s, in the Iad Vashem archives at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Tel Aviv, but in realizing that Nazi barbarism was not limited to suppressing the lives of all those who were considered inferior--Jews, Blacks, Gypsies, the disabled, homosexuals--but because it was also capable of exterminating death itself.

Upon leaving the cemetery, suddenly a warm wind blew. Smelling something strong and pleasant, I noticed that the cemetery’s borders were not grassy, but in fact covered in dill.

Who planted dill around the cemetery?

I got into the car and remembered the day that my father told me that whenever he traveled he consulted the telephone book, searching for any Beiguelmans.

He never found any.
I’ll never forget his melancholy gaze when he told me about this habit and his lack of success.

A melancholy that I was only able to internalize, upon leaving the cemetery, after a fruitless search for some vestige of myself and finding a symbolic tomb, one that had never harbored a body.

**How will it be to live where everything was?**

In Przemyśl, the city of my grandmother Sonia and my grandfather Isaac, the cemetery dates back to the eighteenth century.

There was another, an older one. It did not survive the Nazis, but its entry gate still exists.

This one, from the eighteenth century, also had innumerable tombs destroyed for the pavement of roads, but there are still many remaining headstones.

It sits atop a hill, in a small grove, and seems to have emerged from a dark moment within a fairy tale.

The tombs, very old, are covered with moss and it's practically impossible to read any information that was written on them; a mysterious, rebellious gesture—against death—of forgetting.

But nothing is more disturbing than the sequences of nameless graves. After all, doesn’t everyone have a name?

Przemyśl was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire and my maternal grandparents, Sonia and Isaac, could not even write in Polish.
They were educated in German and the family of my grandmother, the Schlosbergs, owned their land. Something uncommon.

For Jews, owning property was prohibited. Except in the cities that were under the rule of emperor Wilhelm II, an enlightened despot.

Schlossberg means Castle Mountain in German. And in the city there is a tourist attraction that is precisely that, the Castle Mountain.

28% of Przemysl's population came to be composed by Jews. Today, five families of Jewish origin live there.

My guide was one of these descendents and he brought me on a completely nonsensical tour, in which he walked with me, pointing out where once there was a synagogue, the market, the house of who-knows-who.

Nothing exists anymore.

How will it be to live somewhere where everything had been?

I went to Przemysl on a particularly lovely day. Gray and golden.

On the way, passing through wheat fields, glowing in the sunlight, I remembered my grandmother Sonia and her longing for the flowers of Przemysl.

The scenery took my breath away, and in its charm I became disoriented.

Is beauty an affront to the memory of a nightmare?
Envisioning that territory in the splendor of the sun, I was unable to forget, even for a moment, my grandmother, a girl, crossing through the fields with snow up to her thighs.

Knowing that the Nazis plundered the furs and shoes from the Jews in the streets, entering into their houses to seize any form of protection against the cold was always one of the most Dantesque images from World War II that I formed, perhaps only comparable to the dread I'm filled with when remembering the history of the Jews being taken to walk in the waters of one of the city’s rivers, the Wiar River, in temperatures several dozen below zero.

I don’t know how to express the shock that I felt upon arrival in Przemysl and immediately seeing its old metal bridge spanning the river. This one crosses, in truth, the Sam River, but, upon seeing it, all of my first fears came to light, because I did not know this was not the river in which all my family died.

I tried to think of the sweetness of my Grandpa Isaac, who had the most beautiful last name that anyone could hope for: Ehrenfreund, which means loyal friend.

He picked up birds in the snow and kept them in his coat to protect them from the cold.

He was known in the city as the man who had little birds in his pockets...

My Grandpa Isaac had a very sad history. His mother, Liebe, which means loved, died very early, and he was raised by a stepmother who was a real witch.

His two sisters migrated to Paris. The children of one of them were saved by a priest who hid them in a church in a field.

One of them sleepwalked. By the end of the war, he slept tied to the bed. He forever bore the psychological consequences of this. The other became one of the best friends of the filmmaker Claude Lelouch.
Isaac was not born in Przemysl, but in a small city nearby that today belongs to the Ukraine, which you can see from the city.

The confusion of the Polish borders is second only to mine, on this seemingly endless trip.