Like people, cities remember and forget. They remember through the presence of urban reminders and memories of their inhabitants. They forget when architectural traces of their past are wiped out, like when wars destroy their buildings or when politicians decide to substitute the unwanted past by the more “progressive” presence that better fits the ruling ideology. Cities forget also when, as a consequence of war atrocities, their populations disappear or when, due to political turbulences, they become replaced by other populations. All these events took place in cities of Central and Eastern Europe – the European pot that witnessed war destructions, massive territorial and population changes, and ideological pressures at reinterpretations of history.

In 1918 the territories of Eastern Central Europe, for more than a hundred years partitioned between three major empires, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Prussian, fell into the mosaic of independent states (Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Balcan states), most of them ethnically mixed, with strong Jewish minorities, including strong Jewish communities. Twenty years later the outbreak of the Second World War again transformed the European scene and the post-war treaties signed by members of the anti-Nazi coalition, first in Jalta, later in Potsdam, changed the pre-war borders of several countries, annihilated some of them (the Baltic states were annexed to the Soviet Union and transformed into the Lithuanian, Belorussian and Ukrainian Soviet republics), while it in exchange obtained annexed to the Soviet Union (and transformed into the Lithuanian, Belorussian and Ukrainian Soviet republics), while it in exchange obtained on one hand, justification of the naturally Polish (or Ukrainian, Lithuanian etc.) character of the newly acquired places, and, on the other, elimination of traces of the old political systems. Monuments were destroyed and replaced by memorials of revolutionary leaders or national heroes, street names changed, even architecture was “adjusted” to the epoch, like when in Warsaw after 1945 the new leaders ordered the destruction of the too spectacular buildings and the removal from their facades all ornaments and decorations – traces of the bourgeois character offered the status of Soviet republics and massively changed territories of others. Poland was the country that changed its territory the most. The country “shifted westward”: about one third of its territories was described as the “old lands of Piasts” (Piasts being the oldest dynasty of Polish kings), that were “finally recovered” by the Polish state, and territories annexed to the Soviet Union were presented to their citizens as “liberation from the feudal rules and from exploitation by Polish aristocrats”.

In times of political transitions or revolutions, the first steps that the new leaders usually take is wiping out all reminders of the unwanted history. The aim of the ideologically-driven efforts after 1945 was on one hand, justification of the naturally Polish (or Ukrainian, Lithuanian etc.) character of the newly acquired places and, on the other, elimination of traces of the old political systems. Names of cities and towns changed. Lwów became Lviv, Vilnius Bialystok, Königsberg - Kaliningrad etc. One of the best descriptions of this period can be found in the book written by a young German historian, Georg Thum, “Foreign city, Wrocław 1945 and after”, recently translated into Polish. (8)

The ruling ideologists did their best to present the post-war changes as self-evident demonstrations of historical justice. The newly acquired western and northern lands were officially declared as “the old lands of Piasts” (*Plaśa being the oldest dynasty of Polish kings*), that were “finally recovered” by the Polish state, and territories annexed to the Soviet Union were presented to their citizens as “liberation from the feudal rules and from exploitation by Polish aristocrats”. (The fall of communism and of the Soviet Union in 1989-1991 brought new territorial changes. The Baltic states regained their independence, followed by Lithuania and Ukraine. State censorship was abolished in all countries of the former Soviet block and it seemed that the official versions of history could be finally straightened up. However, the repressed memories neither disappear nor accommodate to the changing world, but instead tend to stay in a petrified form. Abolishing censorship resurrected the suppressed old nationalistic myths and thus revealed new biases in historical memories. It was not enough, then, to get rid of the official Soviet version of history; much more challenging is combating the traditional views of national history, some of which date as far back as the 19th century. Until today Poles are struggling with the myth of Poland as a great martyr of Europe, with the nostalgic myth of the lost eastern territories, and with idealization of the interwar period. Analogous myths, although differing in content, prevail in countries of the former Soviet Union and - needless to say - they are greatly at variance with...
Estimated national composition of Wrocław/Breslau before WWII, compared to official statistics

Significant historical events in different time periods – comparison of five cities

The results that I will briefly describe are part of a large research program on urban memory carried out at the Faculty of Psychology, University of Wrocław, in cooperation with several groups of students, both in Poland and abroad. The fact of being a descendant of Poles relocated from eastern territories (Łuwa) made me often wonder whether the city of my forefathers, the way it was remembered by my parents, is also present in memories of its current inhabitants and – by analogy – whether cities remembered by the relocated Germans are also represented in memories of the Polish residents of Wrocław, Gdańsk, Szczecin or Olsztyn. These very private questions became the basis for the quickly developing research program, of which a few results I will report here.

We selected four cities that were deeply affected by the post-war transformations and that changed their state belonging after WWII: Wrocław/pre-war Berlin, Gdańsk/pre-war Danzig, Lviv/pre-war Lwów, and Vilnius/pre-war Wilno. The fifth city was Warszawa, included into the study because of the unprecedented war destructions and an almost total extermination of its 300,000 Jewish residents in Nazi camps. Our investigations were carried out in situ - residents of several districts in each city were interviewed at their homes. Three hundred residents were investigated in Wrocław, 200 in Lviv, 150 in Gdańsk, two studies were run in Warsaw, each with about 90 participants. Finally a pilot study with 51 participants was carried out in Vilnius.

We asked our participants several questions. The first question concerned an estimation of the national composition of the city just before the outbreak of the Second World War. In order to make the task easier, a list of ten different nationalities was provided that included the presently dominant ethnic group, the group dominant before WWII, and Jews. The names of several remaining ethnic groups were adjusted to the studied target city.

A question about the past national composition of a city is largely a projective question - very few people would know the correct answer. On the other hand, answers to this question may tell us a lot about the group attitude towards the place and towards its past. An ethnic group that wants to legitimize its unique rights to a place should emphasize its continuous presence in the place and thus overestimate both the group size and its historical significance throughout history, compared to the size and historical significance of other ethnic groups. This "historical ethnic bias" should be visible not only in overestimation of the relative group magnitude but also of its overall historical significance: important city persons enumerated should be from one's own ethnic group and important events in city history should correspond to the presence of the group in the city. For that reason the two other questions concerned significant figures and events in the city history.

Figures (b) to (f) present mean ratings of the pre-war national composition of three cities, Wrocław, Gdańsk and Lviv, compared to official statistics. As can easily be noticed, in all three cities the size of one's own group is greatly overestimated. According to participants from Wrocław, Poles constituted about 21 % of the pre-war city population, which is an overestimate by at least 20 percent. In Gdańsk the difference from official statistics was even higher and amounted to 29 percent which is far too much even compared to the most optimistic official demographics. In Lviv, the own (Ukrainian) group was overestimated by 26 percent and outnumbered the estimated size of the dominant group (Poles) which is in sharp contrast with reality (see Fig. 5). An interesting picture was provided by participants from Vilnius. Our investigation in Vilnius was a pilot study only but the obtained pattern of results is interesting enough to deserve place here. Vilnius is the only city among those studied that is still multicultural. Although Lithuanians now constitute the majority of the city population (83%), almost 19 percent of the present population are Poles and 14 percent are Russians. This is the reason why, by accident, the small sample also included a certain number of Poles and a few Russians. After having split the results between the three nationalities the following picture emerged (Figure 6). According to the official statistics, the pre-war Wilno was composed mainly of two nationalities: a Polish majority (over 60%) and a big Jewish minority (almost 30%). Lithuanians in the city were in an insignificant minority (the surrounding countryside was mostly Lithuanian, though). Figure 5 shows that Lithuanians perceived the pre-war Wilno as mostly Lithuanian, Poles as mostly Polish, and the few studied Russians gave both national equal chances. Let us note, too, that - compared to official statistics – all three groups greatly overestimated the number of Lithuanians and that of them...
underestimated the number of Poles. Still, Lithuanians deviated from official statistics the most, while Poles were the most correct. Do Poles know better, then, or do they – like their Lithuanian co-citizens - display a similar, although reversed in direction, “historical ethnic bias”?

No striking bias was obtained in Warsaw [f]. A slight deviation from the official statistics (underestimation of both Poles and Jews) was due to the false belief that Warsaw was more multiethnic than it was in reality, and thus to overestimation of the size of several other ethnic groups (German, Russian etc.).

A clear historical ethnic bias was revealed in recall of famous city persons [g]. By far the most important figures mentioned in the cities’ history were of the same nationality as our respondents. The ethnically mixed group of Vilnius participants this time offered similar answers, although Adam Mickiewicz was relatively more often mentioned by Polish and Russian than by Lithuanian respondents. The classification of Mickiewicz, however, is extremely difficult: of Lithuanian origin but writing entirely in Polish about “Lithuania his fatherland”, he is considered to be the greatest Polish romantic poet (although Polish children have severe problems understanding why they have to learn that “Lithuania is their country”), and he tends to be classified as Polish by Poles and as Lithuanian by Lithuanians. In our categorization system he was classified as “other”.

The smallest historical ethnic bias in recall of city historical figures was observed in Gdańsk: the high bar that corresponds to the percent of mentioned German names is mostly due to a very high popularity of the writer Günter Grass on one hand, and Daniel Fahrenheit, on the other. In Wrocław the German names were largely scattered and none was mentioned more than a few times (the most popular was the architect, Max Berg). More popularity was gained by Wrocław Jews, both the pre-war German (Ferdinand Lasalle, Edith Stein) and the post-war Polish Jews (mathematician Hugo Steinhaus and microbiologist, Leopold Hirschfeld). In Lviv the second most popular category was “others” that was comprised mostly of Austrian writer Leopold von Sacher Masoch, and a few names of different nationalities (Russian, Italian, some Jews). The Polish presence was evidenced by names of several writers (e.g., Stanisław Lem, Alexander Fredro) and the mathematician Stefan Banach, and, needless to say, the number of mentioned Polish names underestimated the Polish contribution to the city history.

In Warsaw [h] the remembered famous Poles were in the majority and although this is not surprising considering the pre-war composition of the city and although almost all non-Polish names were Jewish, they were less frequently mentioned than expected. What clearly distinguishes answers of Warsaw respondents from those of other cities is a strong association of the most popular names with WWII. By far the highest rank in both studies was that of Stefan Starzyński, a heroic president of Warsaw during the German attack in September 1939, followed by heroes of the Warsaw uprising in 1944. The most popular Jewish names were leaders of uprising in ghetto in 1943 (Mordechaj Anielewicz, Marek Edelman). WWII is a stamp that entirely dominated the collective memory of Warsaw participants and this was further corroborated in their answers to the last question concerning significant events in city history.

In order to make the latter results comparable across cities, all mentioned events were categorized into historical periods [i]. The period of WWII was obviously more significant for Polish than for Ukrainian or Lithuanian participants. In Wrocław the Second World War was a sort of a prelude to the “real history of the city”. With the exception of the city origin and its first centuries marked with Polish rules (the Piast period), the representation of the history of Wrocław starts with Festung Breslau and with the incorporation of the city into Poland in 1945. The communist time is even better represented (Wrocław was indeed an important cultural site then), and the new post-communist epoch is filled with even more events. As could be expected, the memory of Warsaw history was loaded entirely with WWII (unsuccessful defense in 1939, years of occupation, War...
People migrated to these places, and the city's Jews were exterminated and in 1944-1946 its material destructions but totally changed its population.

During WWII, the city was occupied by the German army and served as a place of local parliaments and elections of kings. In the interwar period strong Polish and Jewish center, an important political and cultural center. Mickiewicz studied and lived here. Big Jewish minority and important Jewish center of talmudism, known as "Jerusalem of the north". After WWII the conflict between Poles and Lithuanians over the future status of Vilnius (Polish or Lithuanian) led Poles to seize Vilnius in 1940 and Vilnius was incorporated into the Soviet Union. In 1991 the heroic defense of the TV tower by Soviet soldiers and the striking workers were signed here that legalized the agreements between the communist party leaders and

In contrast to the Polish cities, neither in Lviv nor in Vilnius was WWII saw uprising in 1944, uprising in the Jewish ghetto, systematic bombing of the city, and destruction of its buildings in high percentage due to war combats. One of the main purposes of the city history. People throughout the world express more and more interest in issues of social memory, who wrote: "Social memory is, in fact, never be written, but this does not mean that attempts should not be undertaken. The results that I tried to briefly present in this paper demonstrate how much is left to be done. Personally, I believe that at least some integration of different versions of history is possible. I therefore agree with James Fenton and Chris Wickham, who two sociologists interested in issues of social memory, who wrote: "Social memory is, in fact, often selective, distorted, and inaccurate. None the less, it is important to recognize that it is not necessarily any of these; it can be extremely exact... the possibility of such accuracy shows that what distorts memory is not some inherent defect in the process of mental recall, but rather a series of external constraints, usually imposed by society -- the constraints are the issue here, not the accuracy of the memories. The transmission of "true" information is only one of the many social functions that memory can, in different circumstances, perform" (Social memory, 1992, p. xi-xii)

 Lviv/Pr-E-war Lvov.

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