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# “Memory is a Bitch.” Taboo and False Memory in Czech Reportages by Mariusz Szczygieł

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**Summary:** This paper concerns works by the Polish contemporary author and journalist Mariusz Szczygieł (\*1966). I analyze Szczygieł’s Czech reportages (*Gottland* [2006], *Zrób sobie raj* [2010] and to some extent *Nie ma* [2018]) from the perspective of memory studies, focusing particularly on the question of taboo in collective memory and the issue of false memory (the products of the minds of individual persons or groups of people that make them sure that a certain event took place despite the fact that it never occurred), which are meant to show the untrustworthiness of memories and reminiscences. I argue that Szczygieł’s Czech reportages are to be read in the context of questions that have been vividly discussed in the Polish public sphere in recent decades: the dilemma of how to deal with the communist past after 1989 (lustration; Polish: *lustracja*); and how to proceed with the referential pact when writing and reading literary nonfiction.

**Keywords:** Mariusz Szczygieł, taboo, memory, false memory, reportage, Czechia, Czechoslovakia

## 1 Introduction

One of the most prominent representatives of contemporary Polish literature is Mariusz Szczygieł. Born in 1966, Szczygieł is a journalist, author, publisher, television, Instagram and Facebook celebrity, co-founder of the Institute of Reportage (*Instytut Reportażu*) in Warsaw, and the winner of the most prestigious Polish book prize, the Nike Literary Award. In this paper, I examine Szczygieł’s Czech reportages from the perspective of memory studies, focusing particularly on the question of taboo in collective memory, along with the issue of false memory (Loftus 1997), which concerns the untrustworthiness of memories and reminis-

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cences.<sup>1</sup> I argue that the author combines those issues with questions that have been intensely discussed in the Polish public sphere in recent decades, such as the dilemma of how to deal with the Communist past after 1989 (illustration; Polish: *lustracja*) and how to proceed with the referential pact when writing and reading literary nonfiction.<sup>2</sup>

Szczygieł is a nonfiction writer. In his works, he combines two traditions of nonfiction writing: on the one hand, the Central European tradition of literary journalism (Egon Erwin Kisch, Melchior Wańkiewicz) and the ‘Polish School of Reportage’, the stream of Polish literary nonfiction identified with such authors as Ryszard Kapuściński, Hanna Krall, and Krzysztof Kąkolewski (Greenberg 2014). At the same time, he follows the path established in the sixties and seventies by the New Journalism in the United States. The former pays a lot attention to the question of form and keenly experiments with composition, style, and language, sometimes blurring the boundaries between journalism and poetry (Krall 2001). The latter attempts to make out of nonfiction a narrative emphasizing the subjectivity of the reporter’s perspective while allowing such means of expression as colloquial language and long dialogues quoted verbatim. A typical feature of Szczygieł’s nonfiction writing is the focus on the individual fates of people and places and his rejection of ‘objective truth’ in favor of (personal) ‘subjective truth’ (Szczygieł 2016).

Szczygieł is also a publisher and an editor of monumental anthologies of Polish literary reportage in the twentieth and twenty-first century: (Szczygieł 2009; Szczygieł 2014a; Szczygieł 2014b). He has also published works by Kisch, Kapuściński, and Krall. The last one is often referred to as his main mentor and teacher (Szczygieł [2018] 2019b). From Krall, Szczygieł borrows the conviction that a good reportage should not only provide information on what has happened and on the intrinsic ‘essence’ of the reported events (Polish: *istota rzeczy*), but should also contain the individually conceived ‘superstructure’ (Polish: *nadwyżka*) of the whole story (Greenberg 2014; Gliński 2014; Gliński 2017).<sup>3</sup> In such a perspective, the ‘superstruc-

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1 In clinical psychology, the term ‘false memory’ refers to a product of mind of individual persons or groups of people that make them sure that a certain event took place despite the fact that it never occurred (or vice versa).

2 This debate was evoked in 2010, when Artur Domosławski published a biography of the world-renowned Polish nonfiction writer Ryszard Kapuściński (1932–2007) that showed how many of Kapuściński’s writings contained elements of pure fiction (Domosławski [2010] 2013).

3 Krall took the term *nadwyżka* from her good friend, Polish film director Krzysztof Kieślowski (1941–1996). As she recalls: “Naszym ulubionym słowem była nadwyżka. Jak nadać temu wszystkiemu nadwyżkę. Lubiliśmy Formana. *Miłość blondynki*. I opowiadania Hrabala *Bar Świat*. Uważałam, że to jest wskazówka i dla nas, sposób podniesienia tej miąższości do rangi sztuki. PYTANIE: A w czym leżała nadwyżka Formana i Hrabala? – W odwiecznych ludzkich uczuciach. Wszystko inne było kostiumem” (Janowska and Beres 1996).

ture' gives a piece of literary nonfiction an additional dimension thanks to which it can be then read as a universal parable concerning political, social, and moral dilemmas.<sup>4</sup> Krall is known mostly for nonfiction works on Polish-Jewish affairs in the twentieth century and the burden of their collective and individual remembrance (Krall 2017). Her famous *Zdażyć przed Panem Bogiem* (*To Outwit God*, Krall 1992) is based on interviews with Marek Edelman, the leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (1943), but at the same time it is a dialogical meditation on the absence of metaphysics. It should thus not be surprising that Szczygieł defines reportage in a similar way, as “a story that really happened and should provide food for thought” (Szczygieł 2022: 43),<sup>5</sup> stating that he looks at ‘superstructure’ (even though he prefers the term *naddatek*, not *nadwyżka*) (Szczygieł 2022: 231–232), and that he follows Krall’s path in exploring the complicated, individual fates in twentieth century East-Central Europe and how they are remembered.

## 2 *Gottland* (2006), *Zrób sobie raj* (2010), *Nie ma* (2018)

The questions of memory appear especially in Szczygieł’s works on Czech and Czechoslovak affairs (the collections of reportages *Gottland* and *Zrób sobie raj* [*Make Your Own Paradise*], Szczygieł [2006] 2014a; Szczygieł [2010] 2019g) as well as in the semi-autobiographical volume *Nie ma* (*Nothing There*, Szczygieł [2018] 2019b), in which Czechia/Czechoslovakia also remains a significant point of reference.<sup>6</sup> In Szczygieł’s eyes, Czech history and culture deserve attention for reasons similar to those given by Jacques Le Rider when he proposes considering Central Europe (*Mitteleuropa*) as an European *lieu de mémoire* (“site of memory”, a term coined by Pierre Nora): for being on the one hand the essential part of the Pan-European “literary republic” and contributing to the emergence and development of the most important currents in European culture (in the twentieth century alone: Marxism,

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4 According to Margot Carlier, in Poland “the reporter is often considered as a real writer [and occupies] a particular place, between eye-witness and creator.... Here, creation is an integral part of documentation.” Reporters thus “elevate the human aspect of the situation, insisting on the particular, individual motivations of each person.” Carlier speaks of “a certain predilection for places and events that appear banal, but which reveal shadows... that only an attentive observer knows how to perceive.” Quotations and translation from French by Susan Greenberg; (Greenberg 2014: 126–127).

5 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations in the text are my own.

6 In the following paper, I focus solely on Szczygieł’s literary reportages. Other Czech writings by Szczygieł include a volume with short texts on various Czech authors and a ‘personal guidebook’ on Prague: (Szczygieł [2012] 2020; Szczygieł 2021).

phenomenology, surrealism, psychoanalysis), and on the other hand for experiencing directly both World Wars, the Shoah, and Stalinism (Le Rider 2008). At the same time, Szczygieł's Czech writings are dominated by the perspective "from below," i.e., the events of global historical significance do not gain importance in his reportages until they also concern an individual experience, including dreams, reminiscences, and desires.

The collection of reportages *Gottland* (2006) made Szczygieł — previously known mostly for being the host of a tabloid talk show on the biggest commercial TV channel in Poland — a superstar of Polish literature.<sup>7</sup> In this collection, the author follows the fates of Czech and Czechoslovak people in the twentieth century, among others the Bat'a family (whose impact on the modernization of factory labor is compared to that of Henry Ford), the actress Lída Baarová (remembered primarily for her liaison with Joseph Goebbels), the author and screenwriter Jan Procházka, and the singer Marta Kubišová (both persecuted by the communist system after the Prague Spring), or the mysterious writer Eduard Kirchberger (known as Karel Fabián after the Second World War). As Przemysław Czapliński and Aleksander Kaczorowski stress,

[*Gottland*] is a masterfully constructed palimpsest; almost all of its stories have previously been told by Czech journalists and prose writers (they are known, for instance, to the readers of Milan Kundera's or Josef Škvorecký's novels). Szczygieł, however, is able to tell them better, certainly in a more accessible manner, than anyone before him. [...] The biographies of the protagonists of Szczygieł's reportages [...] are all, without exception, incredibly dramatic, and it is not the 'insufficiency of history' that provides the source of drama, but precisely its excess, symbolized by two twentieth-century totalitarianisms (Czapliński and Kaczorowski 2018: 665).<sup>8</sup>

According to Szczygieł himself, his book is "about how the system is always a source of suffering. That's how I read the 'superstructure' in these reportages" (Szczygieł 2022: 233).

*Gottland* was followed by the collection of reportages *Zrób sobie raj* (Make Your Own Paradise, 2010). The texts in the volume focus more on the present, not the

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7 The book received the Nike Audience Literary Award in 2007 and there have been four Polish editions to date (2006, 2010, 2011, 2016). It has been translated into Czech, Slovak, Slovenian, Romanian, Estonian, Italian, Hungarian, Spanish, French, and English. Source: *Katalog Biblioteki Narodowej*, <http://katalogi.bn.org.pl/>, (01.10.2021).

8 On the notion that Szczygieł "tells stories better" than authors before him, see one of the Czech reviews of *Gottland*: Matějka 2007, Burián 2006. Szczygieł himself admits that one of the texts in *Gottland*, the history of the Bat'a family, had the following origins: "I acquired all the Bat'a literature, read everything, mixed it up in my head, and based on that I told the story of this family in my own way, because I didn't like other people's stories" (Szczygieł 2022: 378).

past, and are concerned with somewhat lighter issues than the burden of totalitarianisms: the attitudes towards sexuality and one's own carnality (issues including being overweight and having unusually large breasts), the absence of religious rites in daily life, and attitudes towards contemporary nationalism. The stories are still set in Czechia/Czechoslovakia, and the axis of narration is based on a comparison with Poland and specifically understood 'Polishness'. The two Slavic nationalities, Poles and Czechs (interestingly, Szczygieł is not interested in Slovaks), are presented as two radically different communities: the former are meant to be Catholics, romantics, and conservatives, the latter atheists, pragmatics, and progressives (Szczepańska 2013). The comparison partially results from the fact that the historical trajectories of Poland and Czechia/Czechoslovakia were indeed quite different, which exemplifies well the entirely different role the Catholic Church played in shaping national identity in Polish and Czech societies: Poles saw Catholicism as an ally against Protestant Prussia/Germany and Orthodox Russia (and later against the atheist Soviet Union), whereas Czechs perceived it as an oppressor and supporter of the Habsburg/Austrian dominance (Szczepańska 2015). It is easy to recognize here that Szczygieł makes use of the widespread *Polish* stereotypes concerning the "national characters" of both countries (Czapliński and Kaczorowski 2018: 664), cf. (Frukacz 2015: 168). Emphasizing Czechs' common sense, practicality, humor, and disinterest in the "great history", he simultaneously judges the characteristics that are meant to distinguish a "typical Pole": the obsession with an idea of serving a "higher cause" (nation, religion, freedom) and being unpractical, hypocritical, and lacking a sense of humor (Szczepańska 2013: 288–289).<sup>9</sup>

The volume *Nie ma* (2018) is a collection of experimental nonfiction pieces in which Szczygieł courageously tests the limits of the literary form of reportage, for instance by combining nonfiction with poetry or making use of the layout and typography (cf. the reportage on a woman who was sexually abused by her own father; thanks to the unusual, fragmentary form her story takes on a new and dramatic dimension) (Szczygieł [2018] 2019c). The eponymous phrase "nie ma" ("nothing there", but it could be also translated as "[something] is not there", "[something] is missing", or "[something] is lacking") is written in red capitals (NIE MA) and treated as a noun throughout the entire book (Siewior 2019; Frukacz 2020). Szczygieł introduces word games and plays with famous quotations (in a text on the death of a cat: "Tego nie robi się człowiekowi" — an allusion to the famous poem by Wisława Szymborska) (Szczygieł [2018] 2019e: 194) and makes use of the postmodern tendency that allows the re-use of one's own older texts to provide a meta level — not

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9 On the negative Polish auto-stereotype and its long tradition in Polish culture, see: (Leszczyński 2017a).

only the ‘making of’, but also the consequences and discussions encountered after publication (the case of the reportage *Śliczny i posłuszny* about a murderer who worked as a teacher after her incarceration). On the other hand, *Nie ma* contains several pieces of non-experimental literary journalism, including a portrait of the writers Zofia and Ludwika Woźnicka, Polish Jewish twin sisters, Shoah survivors, suicide victims, and good friends of Jadwiga Kaczyńska (the mother of the politicians Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński, also twin brothers). Another example is the text on the Villa Müller, a modernist building in Prague designed by Adolf Loos. Szczygiel focuses not only on the unique solutions and modernist design, but also on the villa’s inhabitants and their fates over the course of the twentieth century.

Despite its dispersed form and variety of topics, *Nie ma* is a volume with very clearly marked leitmotifs: loss, disappearance, decay, and death. Portraits of people and places gain the potential of a metonymy and thus reveal various modi of non-existence (the eponymic “nie ma”). The book also raises methodological issues concerning such topics as memory, truth, and forgetting, which ultimately leads to the questioning the established categories of narrating the past (such as ‘certainty’, ‘experience’, and ‘reminiscence’).

### 3 Memory and False Memory

In psychology, ‘false memory’ refers to a reminiscence of an event that actually never occurred. As American clinical psychologist Elizabeth F. Loftus states, “people can be led to remember their past in different ways, and they can even be coaxed into ‘remembering’ entire events that never happened” (Loftus 1997: 72–73). Loftus has researched the mechanisms of emergence of false memories (e.g., the role of verbal suggestions by the interviewer) (Loftus and Zanni 1975; Loftus and Pickrell 1995) and their social and legal impact (e.g., the cases of supposed sexual abuse of children in which allegations were based solely on false memories).<sup>10</sup> The investigations on false memory show that “reminiscences” of things that never happened can be predisposed by such factors as the wording of questions in surveys, peer pressure, and even subjects’ worldviews and political convictions (Frenda et al. 2013; Shaw 2009; Brainerd and Reyna 2005). The fact that human memory is so influenceable is thus another reason for the methodological precision in scientific, legal, and therapeutic conduct.

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<sup>10</sup> One of the most famous examples is the case Ramona vs. Isabella of 1994, when two Californian therapists were found guilty of reinforcing in their patient false memories of being sexually abused as a child. (Grambs 1997).

The question of false memory concerns not only individuals, but also social groups (such as nations and ethnic communities), as it is related to the social contagion of memory (Roediger et al. 2001). Remarkably, whereas in clinical psychology and the study of law the influenceability of individual or group reminiscences is regarded as highly problematic (as it may lead, e.g., to a wrong diagnosis or an unjust verdict), in some branches of the social sciences and cultural studies false memory is conceived in a more favorable way, mostly for its powerful role in constituting unified collective identities (Brown et al. 2012), and, as a result, for even possessing emancipatory potential.<sup>11</sup>

As a journalist and a reporter, Szczygieł is fully aware that human remembering is one of the least trustworthy sources of gaining information. Even though the term ‘false memory’ appears in neither of his texts on Czech affairs, the problem is noticed and well thought-out. As he writes, “[h]alf of people remember events that never happened to them” (Szczygieł [2018] 2019d: 257). He also shares information gained during a lecture on neuroscience: “[W]itness accounts often contradict each other because memory is not a passive recording – it does not record everything democratically; it is only an active recording – it adjusts facts to fit our assumption. We change the past so that memories fit the whole remembered picture” (Szczygieł [2018] 2019a: 17). The author provides several examples of how his own memory has deceived him; for instance, he evokes his first telephone call with the Czech poet Viola Fischerová and the astonishment he felt years later when reading her diaries and discovering that their conversation must have been entirely different to the one he remembered (Szczygieł [2019a: 16–17]). This leads Szczygieł to an emotional statement: “Memory is a bitch. Or: Oh bitch, memory. That’s what we would have said with Viola while drinking red wine” (Szczygieł [2018] 2019a: 17).

In his other Czech reportages, Szczygieł evokes various examples of false collective reminiscences that today are hard to distinguish from “urban legends,” myths, or rumors spread by the Communist secret service (Szczygieł [2006] 2014b; Szczygieł [2006] 2014d). In most cases they are just quoted and left without an attempt to corroborate them, but sometimes they become either demystified or re-mystified (when it turns out that a counter-story is also based on one’s reminiscence alone). This is the case of the underground philosopher, writer, and poet Egon Bondy (1930–2007), depicted in Bohumil Hrabal’s novel *Něžný barbar* (*The Gentle Barbarian*, 1973). The re-

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<sup>11</sup> Symptomatic in that respect is the conclusion of Ali Mazrui’s article on Pan-Africanism (Mazrui was a Kenyan-American activist and political scientist): “Pan-Africanism was born out of the false memory of a pre-colonial united Africa, divided by imperialism. This Pan-African false memory is positive. Within it there may lie the seeds of Africa’s economic and political salvation. [...] [T]he secret of a continental union may one day lie in a false memory” (Mazrui 2013: 28).

portage on Bondy begins in a way that announces the playfulness with reminiscences and literary legends:

Dear Mr. Egon Bondy,

Many Czechs are convinced that you were invented by Hrabal. Those who know that you were not invented, however, believe that you are dead. In this regard, I would like to ask you for a meeting.

M. Szczygieł

Dear Friend,

I kindly assure you that I am alive. However, due to health reasons [...], I am alive only after 14:00. Please don't come earlier, rather exactly at fourteen o'clock or a little later, then we will have unlimited time.

Yours Bondy" (Szczygieł [2010] 2019 f: 57)

During the meeting, Bondy debunks the literary legend of three outsider artists spending their days in Prague pubs: "Hrabal made it all up. But he didn't lie because he thought it had really happened. We mostly sat at his house and talked about philosophy" (Szczygieł [2010] 2019 f: 75).

The issue of false memory often appears, again, in the context of the Communist past and society's compliance during that time. In the reportage on the nonconformist singer Marta Kubišová, Szczygieł quotes a present-day interview that is meant to illustrate the plasticity of human memory. The interview concerns the so-called Anti-charter, the Communist Party's riposte to Charter 77 (a prodemocratic civil project initiated among others by Václav Havel). The Anti-charter was signed by over 7,000 people, including a plethora of artists, writers, journalists, and other public figures, and hence today it is regarded as an embodiment of society's conformity under Communist rule.

Nowadays, involvement in the Anti-charter is an attractive topic for the media. [...] Journalist Renáta Kalenská talked to the singer Jiří Korn:

"Did you ever sign a petition?"

"I did."

"Which one?"

"The Charter."

"Seriously? Did you have any problems as a result?"

"No. No problems at all. Quite the opposite. It's just ... When you talk about those petitions, there was one they organized which ..."

"Are you thinking of the Anti-charter?"

"Oh yes—yes, I signed it."

"So you didn't sign the Charter, but the Anti-charter?"

"Yes, the Anti-charter." (Szczygieł [2010] 2019 f: 75)<sup>12</sup>

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12 Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.

The interview with Korn leads Szczygieł to further ruminations on the nature of human memory: “[I]t is not just the absent-mindedness of an artist, but perhaps a typically Švejtk-like — and thus conscious — form of forgetfulness” (Szczygieł [2006] 2014c: 176).<sup>13</sup> However, according to Szczygieł, once one takes the imperfection of reminiscences for granted, it is still possible to rely on individual accounts while writing nonfiction. In an interview given a few days after receiving the Nike Award for *Nie ma*, he states explicitly:

I don't always have the opportunity to check what really happened. When someone talks about their intimate experiences, I cannot verify it. But I believe that if an interviewee tells me a made-up story, it is also true, because it is a fact that takes place. The content may have been made up, but that he tells me it is a fact (Porycka and Szczygieł 2019).

It should be noted that such a “hermeneutics of trust” (which in practice might lead to negligence of fact-checking and uncritical repetition of information gained from interviewees) is one of the core characteristics of the Polish School of Reportage and is sometimes seen as its serious methodological weakness (Leszczyński 2017b; Majewska and Domosławski 2017). The debate on this issue was triggered in 2010, when Artur Domosławski published a detailed biography of Ryszard Kapuściński that provided various examples of Kapuściński's fabrications, insufficient research, and his Polish European bias (Domosławski [2010] 2013). Domosławski's book was groundbreaking, as it explicitly urged readers to reconsider the referential pact of nonfiction writing in the post-modern and post-truth era. This initiated fiery discussions not only among journalists and reporters, but also among historians, literary scholars, and public intellectuals (Zajas 2011; Wołowicz 2011; Nowacka and Ziątek 2013; Galant 2020; Rycombel 2021). Ever since, attempts at literariness in nonfiction (particularly nonfiction written by Polish authors) have been treated with greater suspicion, and are sometimes even conceived of being an excuse for insufficient research and forgeries (Włodek 2016).

In *Nie ma*, the remarks on the imperfection of human reminiscences are to be read as a polemic against such an approach. The influenceability of memory is a fact, but it is still not a reason to be permanently suspicious and to dismiss someone's statement, particularly when it eventually allows us to grasp the essence of the issue described. Ultimately, *any* statement might help us consider an already existing popular belief from a new perspective or sometimes even to gain the “superstructure,” i.e., a more universal wisdom. As a nonfiction writer, Szczygieł has taken this methodological attitude to extremes, as exemplified by his petite texts collected in the volume *Projekt: Prawda (Project: Truth, 2016)*, where he introduces

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<sup>13</sup> Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.

the notion of “one’s own truth” (*swoja prawda*) (Szczygieł 2016). Szczygieł devotes a whole chapter in his methodological and semi-autobiographical book *Fakty muszą zatańczyć* (*Facts Must Dance*, 2022) to the question of the fallibility of memory, referring to works by Loftus, Shaw, and other clinical psychologists, and concludes that “objectivity” and exhaustive accuracy in nonfiction writing are hardly achievable ideals:

We, reporters, are in a triple clinch [...]. On the one hand, there is the world, whose flywheel is sometimes a lie, and there are interlocutors with unstable memories. On the other hand — we have only ourselves: our eyes, our ears, and our brains, and therefore a very limited apparatus of perception. Thirdly — [we have] an unobjective, discretionary language that does not know how to be a reliable witness (Szczygieł 2022: 177–178).

In the same book, he notes: “I always hope that the reader remembers: this is a story given by Szczygieł, not an objective account of some reporter’s Absolute. Absolutes do not exist” (Szczygieł 2022: 120).

One can also say that whereas Szczygieł remains aware of the issue of false memory and — despite using different vocabulary — this topic is one of the leitmotifs of his oeuvre, he refuses to treat his informants’ statements without trust and interest. Sometimes, paradoxically, it is precisely the fallibility and plasticity of memory that allow us to sense the ephemerality of human affairs and thus to approach such questions as decay and death (Siewior 2019: 81). Being a faithful disciple of Hanna Krall, Szczygieł attempts to incorporate in his reportages the “superstructure,” i.e., the universal, metaphysical dimension.

## 4 Memory and (Lack of) Taboo

“Czechs don’t have any taboos”, Szczygieł quotes a Prague tourist guide in a text devoted to the contemporary Czech sculptor David Černý, known for his provocative installations and unsophisticated sense of humor (Szczygieł [2010] 2019d: 17). The reportage also explores the distance and realistic approach that Czechs are supposed to have towards their own country, history, and culture.

[Černý’s installation] *Piss* is a monument with which the artist wanted to celebrate Czechia’s entry to the European Union.

The pool into which the two men urinate is shaped like the Czech Republic. The penises are movable and if you send a text message with a sentence to the number next to the statue, they will pee that sentence in a few minutes. [...]

*Piss* was supposed to be ritually destroyed by a procession of Czech skins, but it was guarded by policemen. The skins and nationalists came from all over the country and there were 20 of them. There were only so few defenders of the honor of the homeland. [...]

There has been a lot of chatter on the internet about what would happen if Israel had a statue of people peeing on Israel and Britain had a statue of people pooping, say, chocolate paste on a map of the British Isles. But no one is 100 percent sure what.

One can only be sure of the reaction in Czechia: there will be none” (Szczygieł [2010] 2019d: 17–18).

In other pieces, Szczygieł discusses the question of the commemoration of great historical events and outstanding personalities in Czechia, pointing out the “down-to-earth” perspective with which Czechs conceive of national heroes (Szczepańska 2013: 290). Sticking to the prosaic details and avoiding pathos is meant to characterize not only Czech culture in general, but also ordinary citizens (Szczepańska 2013: 293). As an example, Szczygieł quotes a conversation he had in a pub about the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in 1942. Heydrich — together with Heinrich Himmler and Hermann Göring — was one of the most powerful German Nazis, the commander of the Reich Security Main Office (SS) and the main planner of the Shoah (the “Final Solution”). The assassination of Heydrich, carried out by the paratroopers of the Czechoslovak army in exile, was thus one of the most spectacular underground military actions in occupied Europe during the Second World War.

I was once sitting (23 October 2007) in a Prague pub called *U Parašutistů* [The Paratroopers] where a gentleman – a cab driver by profession – was convincing me that Bernard beer from Humpolec is the best.

– And you Poles are a bit contemptuous of us, aren’t you? – he asked out of nowhere.

– I am certainly not, sir, after all the Czech resistance movement did an incredible thing... (I knew he meant the fundamental questions.) – To kill Hitler’s favorite, it is real heroism! [...]

– But what is there to boast about? – the cab driver objected. – Heydrich was riding not in an armored car but in an open convertible, so it was easier to shoot him.

– But you managed to kill him!

– But don’t exaggerate. He rode without any escort and there were no patrols on the road.

– Well, he didn’t survive!

– Only because he made it easier himself. When the first assassin tried to shoot, Heydrich, instead of hitting the gas and running away, gave the order: stop. So, he served himself to us on a plate, sir. What’s there to marvel at?

– Well, you killed him after all.

– But this is not at all certain, because the machine gun of the first assassin did not fire and to this day we don’t know why. Only the second one threw a grenade at the car.

– So, you killed Hitler’s right-hand man.

– But don’t exaggerate, Heydrich didn’t even defend himself. When he jumped out of the car and wanted to shoot, it turned out there was no magazine in his gun.

– But you managed to kill him.

– But how! He died a week later in hospital. When he jumped into the car to get the magazine, he just sat on the seat, because the bomb had broken his ribs, and they stuck into his spleen. And he actually died later of sepsis (Szczygieł [2010] 2019c: 34–35).

Following the rules of New Journalism that allow an author to make a witty generalization based solely on one casual chat with a stranger, Szczygiel concludes: “Ladies and gentlemen, to be honest, it’s not easy to do a heroic deed in Czechia.”

However, the author does not present Czechs as a society entirely deprived of taboos. Szczygiel refrains from introducing obvious topics that might appear in this context (such as contemporary prejudices against Romani people or the question of mass expulsions after the Second World War, which affected more than three million Germans and Hungarians); instead, he mostly focuses on one particular taboo, namely Czechoslovakia’s Communist past and the issues of compliance and conformity of Czechoslovak society under authoritarian rule.

In the reportage on the actress Lída Baarová (1914–2000), he notes that the city library in Prague does not contain any press cuttings on Baarová from the period between 1948 and 1990, which might mean that her name was on the blacklist of Communist censorship for over forty years. However, his informant points out that in terrorized Czechoslovakia blacklists were not necessary:

“[...] There was no [black]list of names that couldn’t be written or mentioned aloud.”

“So how did people know there was a ban?”

“Everyone had to sense intuitively whose name couldn’t be mentioned” (Szczygiel [2006] 2014b: 74).<sup>14</sup>

By the same token, in the reportage on the world’s largest monument to Joseph Stalin (assembled in Prague in 1955, demolished in 1962), Szczygiel notes that for eyewitnesses and people directly involved in erecting or bulldozing the construction, the Communist past is still a taboo, as almost no one is ready to help him and answer his questions.

In its weekend edition, the newspaper *Lidové noviny* publishes my small ad, with a photograph of the models who posed for [Otakar] Švec [the monument’s architect]. I came across their picture in Prague’s Museum of Communism, but I couldn’t find their names.

I write that I am looking for these people, or relatives of theirs.

Five letters arrive. All more or less about the fact that somebody has very troublesome neighbors and asking if I could do something about it (Szczygiel [2006] 2014d: 99).<sup>15</sup>

Even finding a few eyewitnesses does not help move the investigation forward:

“I’m eighty-five now and I’m blind, on top of which I’m in a wheelchair, but I’m happy to help,” he [an interviewee] says today. “The designer? I reported on the unveiling, but I’m sure I never knew the sculptor’s name. There was no talk of any suicide. [Švec committed suicide shortly

<sup>14</sup> Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.

<sup>15</sup> Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.

before the monument's unveiling – A.K.] What's that you're saying? Nothing was known about it at the time" (Szczygieł [2006] 2014d: 102).<sup>16</sup>

The fruitless conversations, however, are meant to reveal a certain truth of the nature of Communist rule in Czechoslovakia. At the end of the reportage on Stalin's monument, Szczygieł draws the following conclusion, linking the unwillingness to speak to a bad conscience:

Taking note of linguistic details in the Czech Republic can offer clues. Thus, in a situation where someone ought to say: "I was afraid to talk about it," "I hadn't the courage to ask about it," or "I had no idea about it," they say:

"THERE WAS NO TALK about it."

"NOTHING WAS KNOWN about it."

"That WASN'T ASKED about."

I often hear the impersonal form when people have to talk about communism. As if people had no influence on anything and were unwilling to take personal responsibility. As if to remind me that they were just part of a greater whole, [sic!] which also had some sin of denial on its conscience (Szczygieł [2006] 2014d: 102).<sup>17</sup>

This observation, however, is immediately softened by his quoting the opinion of Piotr Lipiński, the author of popular nonfiction books on the postwar history of Poland: "All the people you met are about eighty. The last fifteen years of independence are just an episode in their lives. Too short a time for them to be sure that it's a permanent state of affairs and can't change" (Szczygieł [2006] 2014d: 103).<sup>18</sup>

Szczygieł acknowledges that the period 1945–1989 in Czechoslovakia was much more severe than in Poland, where citizens' protests and manifestations were even able to influence changes of Communist leaders (1956, 1970, 1980) and where the strong position of the Catholic Church guaranteed an ideological counterbalance to the Communist Party (Szczygieł [2010] 2019a; Szczygieł [2010] 2019b; Szczygieł [2006] 2016). Thus, when he introduces a critique of compliance, in most cases he does so indirectly, mainly by quoting opinions of others ("The [Communist] Czech government itself is surprised by society's conformism,' reports a correspondent for *Journal de Genève*" (Szczygieł [2006] 2014d: 90).<sup>19</sup>) Moreover, he points out that the questions about the lack of resistance (as well as the willingness to repress it in the

<sup>16</sup> Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.

<sup>17</sup> Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.

<sup>18</sup> Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.

<sup>19</sup> Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones. Cf. the quoted opinion of Viola Fischerová: "[Czesi] Havla też nie szanują, bo jego istnienie przypomina im, że nie byli bohaterami. Robią wszystko, co mogą, żeby odebrać mu bohaterstwo, umniejszyć jego dzielność, dzięki czemu nie będzie widać, że sami byli tak tchórzliwi" (Szczygieł [2018] 2019a: 20).

collective memory) were raised and disputed by the most outstanding Czech writers and intellectuals, among them Milena Jesenská, Josef Jedlička, Václav Havel, and Pavel Kohout.

Writer Pavel Kohout points out that, after the war in Czechoslovakia, there were no Soviet troops, there was no putsch, the communists had genuine support, and in the 1946 elections they gained more than 40 percent of the vote. In 1938, the Czech nation had experienced annexation and occupation, and had been betrayed by Great Britain and France, so when the communists took power, it looked as if the Soviet Union was their only reliable means of support. [...] “That’s why, later on,” says Pavel Kohout, “it was so hard to admit to those who had supported the communists that they had unwittingly done the devil a favor. And of course it all happened very quickly” (Szczygieł [2006] 2014d: 92).<sup>20</sup>

The benevolent way in which Szczygieł presents the taboo of compliance and the issue of society’s conformity under the Communists might result from the fact that *Gottland* and *Zrób sobie raj* were written in a time of constant discussions on lustration (Polish: *lustracja*), i.e., the question of purging the public sphere of former Communist agents and informants. Post-1989 Poland has never gone about solving this trouble as quickly and decisively as, e.g., Germany, and hence in the first two decades after the fall of Communism, the issue of *lustracja* triggered numerous political turbulences and crises, including the overthrow of the government in June 1992.<sup>21</sup> Since 1989, opposing/endorsing lustration became a crucial demarcation line between the leftist-liberal and conservative mindsets in Poland (Śpiewak 2005; Kość 2011), which was mirrored by the literary production of the time. Particularly (but not only) Polish genre fiction keenly explored the motive of former (i.e., Communist) intelligence agents whose identity remained secret after 1989 and who were never held accountable for the evil they had caused, and/or whose political influences did not expire after the change of system (Harny 2007; Miłoszewski [2007] 2021; Twardoch 2007; Kruszyński Kruszyński 2009; cf. also widely acknowledged theater plays by Tomczyk 2005; Kopka 2007). On the other hand, the liberal and progressive milieus in Poland (to which Szczygieł has always belonged) generally

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<sup>20</sup> Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones.

<sup>21</sup> That was also the reason why the Polish Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej – Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu*, IPN) was established not until 1999 and its tasks did not formally include lustration procedures until 2007. In Germany, by contrast, the Stasi Records Agency was founded in 1990. See: *Ustawa z dnia 18 grudnia 1998 r. o Instytucie Pamięci Narodowej – Komisji Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu 1998*; *Ustawa z dnia 18 października 2006 r. o ujawnianiu informacji o dokumentach organów bezpieczeństwa państwa z lat 1944–1990 oraz treści tych dokumentów 2006*; cf. (Stobiecki 2008).

opposed lustration. One of the most significant endorsers of the anti-lustration line was the daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, for which Szczygieł worked for years as a reporter and where Hanna Krall was his direct supervisor. Despite its dissident origins (it was established in 1989 by former anti-Communist activists), *Gazeta Wyborcza* passionately rejected the idea of lustration as a populist, irresponsible, and undemocratic political tool that serves solely to take revenge (Kość 2011: 79). From this point of view, the recent Communist past was too entangled and ambiguous to make easy moral judgements and generalizations (Kopeček 2008; Stobiecki 2008).<sup>22</sup> Szczygieł's work has never directly concerned any debate on the lustration question (in that sense, his reportages and articles are consequently apolitical), but his approach does not significantly differ from *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s line on that issue (cf. the interview after the Czech edition of *Zrób sobie raj*, in which he admits that he does not consider accusations of complying with communism leveled at, e.g., Milan Kundera or Pavel Kohout to be an issue at all; Pilátová 2011). It is also quite telling in that respect that in the two pieces on Egon Bondy (Szczygieł [2010] 2019f; Szczygieł [2010] 2019e), Bondy's collaboration with the Czechoslovak secret services is shown in a very understanding and non-judgmental way (on this aspect of Szczygieł's writing in *Gottland*, see also: Brdečková 2007).

At the same time, in Szczygieł's Czech reportages one can observe the moral dilemma as to whether it is better to obey the oppressive power (sometimes: to actively collaborate) and survive or to take part in a resistance undertaking that has no chances of success. This quandary (known primarily as *bić się czy nie bić*, "to fight or not to fight"), is rooted in the nineteenth century and has been one of the most distinctive topoi of Polish culture since Romanticism (Szlanta 2018). It is another version of the choice between the Romantic or realist form of understanding nationhood; *romantyzm czy pozytywizm* (Czapliński and Kaczorowski 2018: 665). The pragmatic, conformist, "down-to-earth" attitude of Czechs (and its consequences: taboo, silence, "some sin of denial on its conscience;" Szczygieł [2006] 2014d: 102) is thus presented as a bitter, yet understandable and realist decision to choose compromise and adaptation over fighting a Romantic losing battle.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. the following passage in one of the loudest texts on that topic: "Ludzie, którzy chcą lustracji, mają głębokie przekonanie, że kiedy zajrzą do papierów, będą szczęśliwsi, bo prawda, a szukają prawdy, ma ich uszczęśliwić. Nie będą. Czy pan myśli, że wschodni Niemcy są szczęśliwsi od czasu, gdy utworzyli archiwa Stasi? [...] Nie ma sprawiedliwości w ujawnianiu akt. Obok świni są w archiwach ludzie słabi, obok winnych – niewinni. Gdy poszczególne sprawy wyjdą na światło dzienne, będzie wiele krzyku, wiele odwołań, wiele obrzucania się błotem. I do niczego to nie doprowadzi" (Smoleński 1998).

## 5 Conclusions

The questions of memory (the issue of taboo and false memory) that appear in Szczygieł's works on Czech and Czechoslovak affairs are raised mostly in the contexts of dealing with a difficult past, particularly in relation to Communist rule. For instance, he writes that in his opinion “the greatest achievement of the Prague Spring (1968) was that one was allowed to reminisce with impunity” (Szczygieł [2010] 2019c: 37). The fact that reportages concern individual people allows narration of the most recent history of Bohemia via concrete fates and cases. Szczygieł's way of presenting the past remains “Polish”, i.e., in the way he introduces different topics (such as the dilemma of how to deal with the Communist past or the question of the fallibility of memory) the Polish reader can easily recognize echoes of debates which shaped the Polish public sphere in recent decades (the question of lustration and the question of the referential pact in nonfiction writing). At the same time, it is also clear that dealing with the topics of taboo and the imperfection of human memory is intended to reveal some more universal aspects of human existence and thus could be regarded as a “superstructure” in Hanna Krall's sense.

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