

# World War 2.0: Commemorating War and Holocaust in Poland through Facebook

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**Abstract:** The Internet seems to have become the area where instances of individual and collective remembrance, of private and public commemoration, and of memory and postmemory intersect in a new and effective way. This article explores two Polish examples of World War II and Holocaust commemoration that have recently been issued on Facebook: the Warsaw Rising commemorative campaign and the educational project on the young Holocaust victim Henio Żytomirski. As the analysis demonstrates, what determines the value of such online projects is their performative effectiveness. The examination of both examples aims to contribute to the current debate on cultural memory, in which the focus is increasingly on the dynamical and processual character of *remembering*, rather than on *memory* as a static product.

**Keywords:** Web 2.0, Facebook, World War II, Holocaust, cultural memory, commemorative performance, Poland

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The rapid proliferation of Web 2.0 applications, and more specifically of popular social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace, offers many new opportunities to expose and circulate both individual and collective memories of painful histories. With their wide range of performative gestures,<sup>1</sup> SNSs and other Web 2.0 applications are not only an extremely appropriate tool for individuals to work through their personal traumas, but they also offer the opportunity to those who are less or only indirectly affected to actively take part in the commemoration of a given event. In this way, the World Wide Web has become the area where instances of individual and collective remembrance, of private and public commemoration, and of memory and postmemory intersect in a new and effective way. As Andrew Hoskins has argued, the advent of Web 2.0, with its emphasis on

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<sup>1</sup> When using terms such as ‘performative (gestures)’ and ‘performativity’ in this paper, I particularly intend to stress the ‘non-inscribed’ or embodied aspects of transmitting cultural memory as opposed to ‘inscribed’ or textual kinds of transmission (cf. Connerton 1989).

user-generated content, has been decisive for the emergence of an entirely new ‘digital media ecology’, which is not only characterised by a blurring of traditional divisions between the public and the private, the individual and the collective, and producers and consumers, but which has also contributed to ‘a new memory – an emergent digital network memory – in that communications in themselves dynamically add to, alter, and erase, a kind of living archival memory’ (Hoskins 2009, 92). Whereas memory is traditionally associated with the ‘retrieval [or] representation of some content of the past in the present’, this new digital network memory is both ‘embedded in and distributed through our sociotechnical practices’ (92). Being ‘increasingly networked but also actively and re-actively constructed on-the-fly’ (94), it forces us to reconsider the existing categories by means of which we come to terms with past events and the many ways in which they are being (re)distributed or, rather, (re)mediated.

When exploring the potential of Web 2.0 applications as a medium for private and public commemoration, critics generally concentrate on the phenomenon of the online exposure of personal tragic or traumatic memories (e.g., Arthur 2009; Schutt 2008; Zimmermann 2010). The focus here is on individual testimonies and memories of recent painful events that may have occurred either in the private or in the public sphere. As Paul Arthur (2009, 71) notes, what such instances of immediate online testimony and commemoration of public (military, terrorist, natural, etc.) disasters may create at most, is some kind of *collected* (rather than a *collective*) *memory*: an accumulation of the most diverse individual testimonies and memories of the same event, resulting in a particular online ‘community of pain’.<sup>2</sup> Apart from such evident examples of online exposure of personal traumas, however, commemorative gestures are increasingly present in the social media in yet another way. Whereas many forms of commemoration are used by individuals to work through their personal traumas or by entire communities to restore communal ties that have been broken by the disasters to which they are bearing witness, some other remarkable articulations are clearly aimed at constructing new virtual communities around memories of painful events from a more distant past. Unlike the former examples, these initiatives are less important for their therapeutic role, but all the more for their pedagogical, ethical or political function. As a consequence, their effectiveness does not only depend on the openness and interactivity of Web 2.0 applications, but also on the degree of their local, national or, most commonly, international penetration. As these projects are pursuing maximal participation of particular local, national or transnational groups, they are likely to emerge on those SNSs that are the most popular among the target group in question. Although there are still considerable national and generational differences in the use of SNSs, Facebook is currently the most popular network not only in terms of intergenerational use, but also in terms of global penetration.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it should not surprise that the examples that I would like to present here were issued exactly on Facebook.

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<sup>2</sup> In his article Arthur discusses obvious examples such as September 11, 2001, and the devastations caused by the Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

<sup>3</sup> According to Alexa (<http://www.alexa.com>), Facebook is the second most popular website worldwide (after Google and followed by YouTube). As the audience demographics show, the site is popular in the age groups 18-24, 25-34, 35-44 and 45-54. The +55 groups are underrepresented on Facebook.

Although scholars have recently warned against a black-and-white approach to the issue of digital media and memory,<sup>4</sup> collective memory of traumatic events both in Europe and elsewhere is still dominated by the interconnected tragedies of World War II and the Holocaust. As the generational distance to and global interest in these painful histories is increasing, there is also a growing concern to develop new ways of bringing testimonies of these events into circulation among ever new 'postmemorial' generations and transnational audiences. A typical strategy that is being used is to turn away from real testimony and to favour fictitious accounts, which through their extensive use of imaginative devices are often more effective in conveying memories of war and genocide. According to Marianne Hirsch such instances of what she calls 'postmemory' constitute 'a powerful and very particular form of memory' precisely because of the 'imaginative investment and creation' through which they mediate their relation to the past (Hirsch 2002, 22).

Another tendency that characterises contemporary memory work is a preference for mass cultural forms such as museums, commemorative sites, television, films and the Internet, which enhance the experiential character of commemorative practices, turning them into interactive performances of memory.<sup>5</sup> Yet, a first notable example that intends to commemorate World War II through Facebook does not make the most of the imaginative and performative opportunities that are being offered by the medium. In 2009, the Belgian Institute for Veterans and Victims of War set up the *Live and Remember* project (<http://www.inig.be/herinneringseducatie-scholen/live-and-remember/id-menu-421>). It is a yearly contest which invites Belgian pupils to create a fan page on Facebook in memory of one of the 25,360 allied soldiers who were buried in Belgium. The project aims at forging a strong postmemorial community of teenagers who probably have had little access to direct testimony of World War II, not only by approaching them through the kind of media with which their generation is most familiar,<sup>6</sup> but also by stimulating them to create new forms of testimony themselves, rather than to passively lend their ears to existing accounts. The main weakness of the initiative, however, is that it reinforces the unbridgeable gap between the dead soldiers who are to be saved from oblivion and the pupils who are trying to reconstruct their biographies in the form of fan pages, rather than trying to overcome this generational and existential distance by making full use of the performative functions that are offered by the central architectural organisation of Facebook as a fluid hypertext of interconnected profiles. What is behind this conservative approach of the medium is, most probably, the fear of

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Michael Rothberg's theory of 'multidirectional memory' as an alternative to the dominant model of a competition of different groups' collective memories (2009).

<sup>5</sup> With regard to the mediation of historical memory in mass culture Alison Landsberg has launched the concept of 'prosthetic memory' – a kind of memory that 'emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past' (Landsberg 2004, 2) and that takes the form of 'privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past' (19). According to the editors of a recent volume on the phenomenon, digital memory is pre-eminently prosthetic due to the almost complete merging of the organic (human) experience of remembering with its inorganic (technological) supplement (cf. Garde-Hansen et al. 2010, 11-13).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Westlake (2008) for a discussion of the importance of SNSs such as Facebook for those belonging to Generation Y (born between 1982 and 2001).

a diminution of institutional control over the online message when compared to traditional offline commemorative practices.<sup>7</sup>

While the Belgian project is still conventional in its distribution of commemorative ‘roles’, the two Polish examples I will analyse in more detail are much more radical in their use of Web 2.0. Both these Polish projects were issued on Facebook in 2009, and both of them have received considerable public attention. Each of them focuses on an event that is central to contemporary Polish cultural memory. The advertising campaign *The Mate from the Past – 1944 LIVE* deals with the currently omnipresent Warsaw Rising, whereas the educational project on the young Holocaust victim Henio Żytomirski commemorates the extermination of the large and vital Jewish community that for centuries had inhabited the Polish city of Lublin. What makes these examples so interesting is that they do not only have a lot in common, but they also display considerable differences in their initial set-up as well as in their commemorative practices. While they both fully benefit from the performative nature and (trans)national distribution of SNSs such as Facebook, their commemorative value could also be questioned due to their fluid existence and overt artificiality. As the analysis will demonstrate, however, what eventually determines the value of such online projects is, first of all, their performative effectiveness. In this way, the examination of both Facebook examples aims to contribute to the current debate on cultural memory in our new media age, in which the focus is increasingly on the dynamical and processual character of *remembering*, which by its very nature is ‘performative rather than reproductive’ (Erlil and Rigney 2009, 2), rather than on *memory* as a static product.<sup>8</sup> Before proceeding to the analysis, however, at least some attention should be paid to the particular background against which these internationally acclaimed projects came into being and, more specifically, to the remarkable fact that they were both created in Poland.

### **Collective Memory, Politics of History, and Pop Culture in Contemporary Poland**

Scholars have described the current compulsive preoccupation with the past as a ‘memory boom’ (Huyssen 2003, 18) or an ‘upsurge of memory’ (Nora 2002), and the memory cultures that result from it as indications of a general ‘era of commemoration’ (Nora 1998). Yet, as Andreas Huyssen has remarked, no matter how much memory stands out as ‘a cultural obsession of monumental proportions across the globe’, its political practices are still predominantly national (2003, 16). In other words, although the current ‘culture of memory’ may be perceived and analysed on a global scale, we should not forget about the local, regional or national context of particular memory discourses. As Huyssen reminds, this distinction is

<sup>7</sup> Zizi Papacharissi summarizes the sense and consequences of the flexible architecture of SNSs as follows: ‘Because virtual geographies are founded upon a fluid premise of evolving connectivity, they are situational and not static. Conceiving of them as static reflects an imperialistic tendency to transfer the familiarity of the offline world online. Because the offline and online worlds operate in synergy rather than in isolation, a flexible architecture permits online social systems to form organically and not as colonies of their offline equivalents’ (Papacharissi 2009, 216).

<sup>8</sup> Cf., for instance, Jeffrey K. Olick’s objections against the tendency to ‘substantialise’ or ‘reify’ fluid practices such as nation building and (collective) remembering by means of static concepts such as ‘nation’ and ‘(collective) memory’: ‘Where *remembering* is a quintessentially relational phenomenon (what is it if not relating?), *memory* is a grossly substantialist metaphor, implying cold storage rather than hot use’ (Olick 2003, 6).

particularly pertinent to countries belonging to the former Eastern Bloc: while people living in the West may have the impression that memory is today first and foremost an instance of successful marketing by a growingly transnational culture industry, in these countries it keeps reappearing as a key political concern (Huysen 2003, 15). As I will now demonstrate, this situation has led to a remarkable constitution of memory culture in contemporary Poland.

Around 1989, at the same time when the North Atlantic world was already suffering from what Huysen calls 'a hypertrophy of memory, not history' (Huysen 2003, 3), the countries from the former Eastern Bloc were completely occupied with a more urgent issue: the political and economical transition from communist to free-market societies. As Maria Janion (2000, 25-29) notes, early post-communist Polish culture expressed very little interest in national history and the sacrosanct collective values of the Polish nation. Since all attention in the new independent state was devoted to the establishment of a democratic system and a competitive market economy, the practically uniform complex of romantic values, symbols and rituals that had dominated Polish culture for 200 years was believed to have fallen into a final decline.<sup>9</sup> Around the year 2000, however, as Poland was in the middle of the EU accession process, the romantic paradigm started to resurface. Poland's integration into the multinational European Union went hand in hand with a rapid re-examination of national identity and history. As a result, Poland in some way began to go through an accelerated assimilation of a type of memory culture that started flourishing in other European countries much earlier.

As Huysen argues, in their struggle to recover from traumatic histories, nations in general are faced with 'the task of securing the legitimacy and future of their emergent polity by finding ways to commemorate and adjudicate past wrongs' (Huysen 2003, 16). In the case of Poland, this process of utilising the past for present politics has even led to an overt 'politics of history' (*polityka historyczna*), which was installed during the short political hegemony (2005-2007) of Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński and their conservative *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* ('Law and Justice') party, and is still being continued in a modified way by their political successors. By commemorating and resuscitating the key events of Polish history, their politics aimed at settling a 'real' postcommunist state – a 'Fourth Republic' as an alternative to the early postcommunist Third Republic. Through a well-considered choice of past events, the sacrosanct complex of romantic values not only resurfaced, but it also appeared in a series of new guises that were more appealing to the general public. The two events that apparently lend themselves the most to becoming the young postcommunist nation's 'chosen traumas' (Volkan 2001), are undoubtedly the 1940 Katyń massacre<sup>10</sup> and the

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<sup>9</sup> Ewa Domańska seconds Janion's assessment of the situation around the year 2000 by claiming that 'all the constructs that made up the skeleton of the way the Poles thought about the past (nation, state, history, gender, race etc.), as well as the myths that supported them, have become "dead metaphors"' (Domańska 2000, 261).

<sup>10</sup> In April-May 1940 the Soviet secret police (NKVD) executed more than 20,000 Polish officers in a forest near Katyń (Russia) and at a number of other locations. As the Soviets subsequently did anything to cover the mass murder up, Katyń became an important reference point for anticommunist opposition. Since 1989, the massacre has further developed into a national trauma, reaching its first peak of popularity on 17 September 2007, the 68<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Soviet invasion in Poland, when the film *Katyń* (directed by Andrzej Wajda) premiered in Warsaw in the presence of president Lech and prime minister Jarosław Kaczyński. The Katyń trauma received a decisive boost of popularity in the wake of the tragic plane crash near Smolensk (Russia) on 10 April 2010, killing president Lech Kaczyński, his wife, and many of the nation's leading political, military, and civic figures.

1944 Warsaw Rising.<sup>11</sup> What makes these traumatic events so suitable for the ongoing politics of history, is that they are not only emblematic for the huge human and material losses of World War II, but they also indirectly remind of the subsequent Soviet hegemony, during which exactly this kind of painful events were systematically threatened by state-sanctioned erasure.<sup>12</sup>

Although the marketing of memory by the culture industry and its instrumentalisation for political purposes can both be seen as serious threats to the objective understanding of the past, it cannot be denied that the recent shift from history to memory also offers a couple of new opportunities. As Nora has argued, this inevitable shift also implies a ‘democratisation of history’, as a result of which emancipatory versions of the past may come to the surface: ‘Unlike history, which has always been in the hands of the public authorities, of scholars and specialised peer groups, memory has acquired all the new privileges and prestige of a popular protest movement’ (Nora 2002, 6). This ‘internal decolonisation’ (6) of contemporary nation-states can be perceived most prominently in the plurality of the forms through which issues of national or other collective identities are mediated:

National memory cannot come into being until the historical framework of the nation has been shattered. It reflects the abandonment of the traditional channels and modes of transmission of the past and the desacralisation of such primary sites of initiation as the school, the family, the museum, and the monument: what was once the responsibility of these institutions has now flowed over into the public domain and been taken over by the media and tourist industry (Nora 1998, 363).

Notwithstanding the real perils of ‘commodification’, ‘spectacularisation’, and ultimately even of amnesia that may result from the rise of the new media as ‘carriers of all forms of memory’, Huyssen warns that ‘the problem is not solved by simply opposing serious memory to trivial memory, the way historians sometime oppose history to memory *tout court*, to memory understood as the subjective and trivial stuff out of which the historian makes the real thing’ (Huyssen 2003, 18-19). Being aware of the imminent banalisation of history on the one hand and of a too naive ‘trust in the emancipatory potential of the new media’ (22) on the other, he proposes to acknowledge at least the importance of present-day memory culture ‘in the current transformation of temporal experience that has followed in the wake of the new media’s impact on human perception and sensibility’ (21).

When we consider the Polish ‘politics of history’ from the point of view of the transformation of the ways in which historical memory is mediated, we can shed some new light on the current ‘memory boom’ of the ‘Fourth Republic’. First of all, what seems to lie at the basis of these recent political practices is a struggle to (re)gain institutional control over the past

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<sup>11</sup> On 1 August 1944, armed groups belonging to the Polish underground resistance rose in revolt against the Nazi occupiers in Warsaw. Although the insurgence was intended to last only a few days, in order to regain control of the Polish capital before the Red Army would reach it, it would continue for 63 days (until 3 October). Approximately 20,000 insurgents and up to 200,000 civilians were killed whereas some 700,000 inhabitants were expelled from the city, which was later systematically destroyed by the Nazis until it practically ceased to exist.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Repressive erasure’ is but one of the (at least) seven types of ‘forgetting’ between which Paul Connerton (2008) proposes to distinguish within the debate on cultural memory.

and its remembrance. Faced with the rapid emergence of a new media culture, postcommunist authorities in Poland gradually seem to have become aware that losing control over the mediation of the national past also threatens the construction (mainly for political purposes) of a hegemonic version of this past. In order to restore their hegemonic control Polish authorities, and particularly those belonging to the (conservative) right wing, not only started modernising the state's memorial 'hardware' (by creating new commemorative monuments, sites, museums, etc.), but they also tried to partly claim the increasingly multimedial and pop cultural 'software' (consisting mainly of all kinds of narrative 'texts' such as films, songs, historical accounts, etc.) of cultural memory.<sup>13</sup> Notable examples in this sphere are Andrzej Wajda's extremely hyped movie *Katyń* (2007) and the Warsaw Rising Museum (2004), which not only was one of the major accomplishments of Lech Kaczyński during his reign as mayor of Warsaw, but also the symbolical start of his politics of history.

Yet, no matter how much contemporary memory culture in Poland seems to suffer from a top-down appropriation of its most popular forms, we should not overlook the numerous bottom-up memorial initiatives that are being taken, which, admittedly, often confirm the existing hegemonic memory discourses, but some of which certainly have the potential to yield counterhegemonic narratives.<sup>14</sup> In an article dealing with the growing tendency to privilege representations of national and historical themes in such popular forms of expression as rock music, comics, and graffiti art, Marcin Czubaj (2005) substantiates the hypothesis of a general phenomenon, rather than a state-controlled mechanism. Czubaj considers the recent interest of pop and mass culture in issues of national identity as a new phase after a decade of reticence in dealing with national history.<sup>15</sup> He also proves that cultural mediators may have various reasons for promoting issues of national identity and history – reasons which should not be restricted to political abuse. In any case, the most striking characteristics of the identity debate in Poland during the last decade are undoubtedly the weakening of state dominion and the plurality of the forms through which the discussion is mediated.

Notwithstanding the 'internal decolonisation' and increasing democratisation of Polish cultural memory, the public space in Poland still appears to be dominated by a particular image of the Polish past, in which collective values such as honour, heroism and martyrdom prevail over the traumatic experiences of the individual. As I already indicated, this 'typically' Polish, messianistic interpretation of national history has slowly crystallised itself in two major forms: the Katyń massacre and the Warsaw Rising. Of these two 'chosen traumas', the latter is undoubtedly the most exemplary for the current constitution of cultural memory in Poland: not only was the inauguration of the Warsaw Rising Museum the symbolical start of the new politics of history, but as a propagator of all kinds of pop and mass

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<sup>13</sup> For the distinction and complex interdependences between the 'software' and the 'hardware' of cultural memory, cf. Etkind (2009, 194).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of this phenomenon with reference to the recent avalanche of Polish comics dealing with national history, cf. De Bruyn (2010).

<sup>15</sup> Despite the absence of national history in Polish pop and mass culture during the 1990s, the objection that the Polish authorities of the early Third Republic did not care about historical issues would be too much in line with the biased opinions of those supporting the ideal of a 'Fourth Republic'. As Paweł Machcewicz (2008) and others have argued, an early postcommunist 'politics of history' did exist, but it was primarily aimed at paving the way for a democratisation and pluralisation of issues of history and memory. Cf. also recent work by Robert Traba, most notably the introduction to his 2007 collection of essays (2007, 11-64).

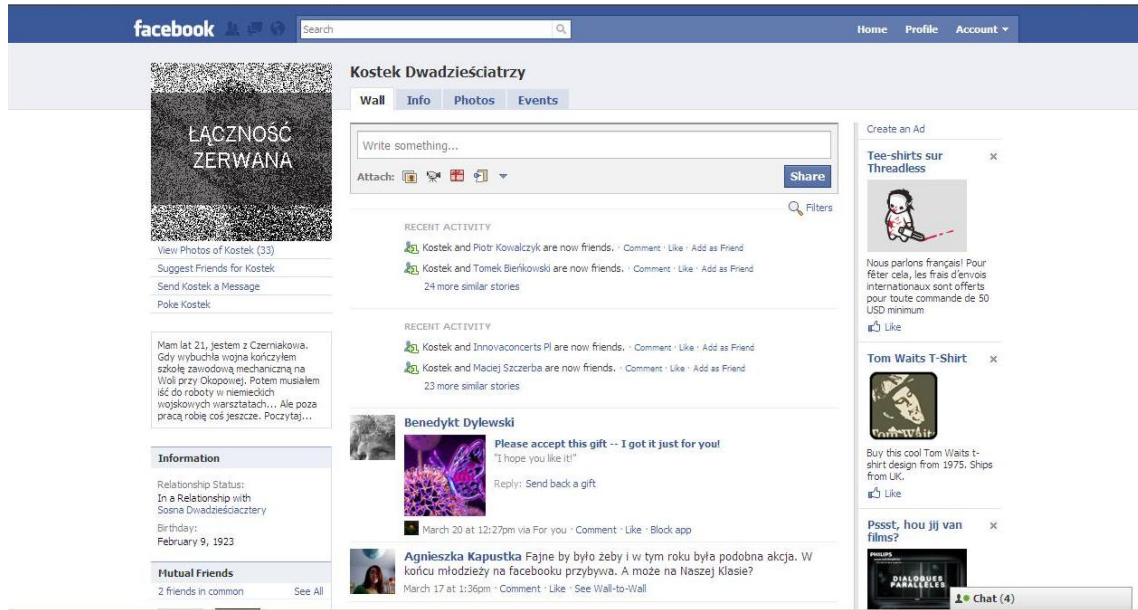
cultural commemorative activities the museum also serves as a catalyst of many other initiatives, such as the ones that will be analysed here.

### **1944 LIVE: How Well Do You Know Kostek and Sosna?**

The Facebook campaign *Kumpel z Przeszłości – 1944 LIVE* ('The Mate from the Past – 1944 LIVE') was created in the summer of 2009 by a team of young copywriters belonging to the Polish advertising agency San Markos. The main strength of the project was undoubtedly the way it penetrated the very fabric of Facebook: instead of employing the same top-down strategy as the organisers of the *Live and Remember* contest (cf. supra), the *1944 LIVE* project had a typical bottom-up configuration from the very beginning. A few days before the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Warsaw Rising, the people from the agency created two fictitious profiles on Facebook: Kostek Dwadzieścietrzy ('Kostek Twenty-Three', born on 9 February 1923; <http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100000050158456>) and Sosna Dwadzieścietrzy ('Sosna Twenty-Four', born on 23 September 1924; <http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100000099598202>). Kostek and Sosna were 'staged' as being 'in a relationship' and briefly introduced in their respective 'about me' boxes (see Figures 1 and 2). Soon a slowly growing number of friends took notice of and reacted on the regular status updates that Kostek and Sosna posted on their profiles. In the days preceding and following 1 August, the young couple wrote informal reports on their preparations of and first exploits in the Warsaw Rising, and they did this with such a naturalness and credibility, that it seemed as if they were 'real' people who offered their friends a live report from the 1944 insurrection, in which they actively took part as a soldier (Kostek) or a courier (Sosna). As the days passed by and the number of friends was increasing, Kostek and Sosna gradually introduced the whole range of typical Facebook applications, posting quizzes such as 'How well do you know Sosna?', sharing historical pictures of Warsaw during the Rising, revealing footage of real-life reconstructions of battle scenes, and adding links to insurgent songs, documentary films, and websites dealing with the Rising. With the passage of time their profiles grew into commemorative communities that enclosed both casual chit-chat on everyday life during the Rising and serious discussions of the deeper significance (or the lack thereof) of the insurrection. After a few weeks the community even entered into real life, as the people 'following' Kostek and Sosna were invited to search for air drops everywhere in Warsaw. At the very end of the 'virtual' Rising the creators also organised a closing event, thus allowing friends and fans of Kostek and Sosna to meet their spiritual parents. At this point, both profiles together had about 3,000 friends, and their number kept growing afterwards. The project soon received national and even international acclaim, first of all in the form of all kinds of prizes at advertising contests.

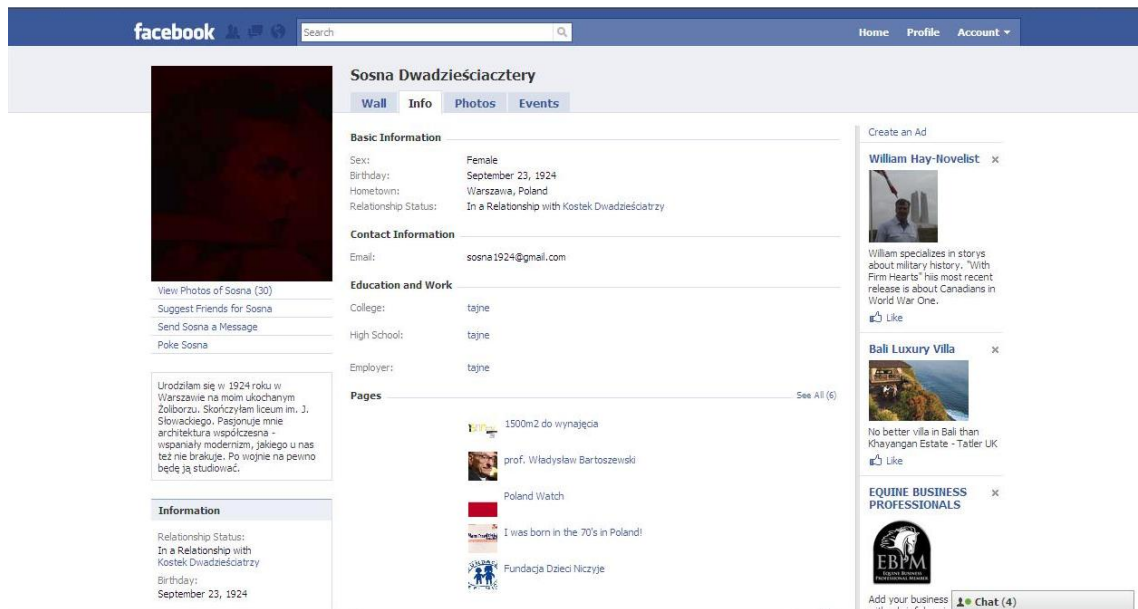


Figure 1. Screen grab of the Kostek Dwadzieściatrzy profile Wall.



Source: <http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100000050158456> (accessed 20 May 2010).

Figure 2. Screen grab of the Sosna Dwadzieściatrzy profile Info page.



Source: <http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100000099598202> (accessed 20 May 2010). This profile is no longer accessible.

Whereas commentators perhaps too often mentioned the huge number of friends as indications of the project's success, I prefer to focus on two other, highly interconnected characteristics of *1944 LIVE*: its performative effectiveness and its mobilising power within the target group. As I have already indicated, what distinguishes SNSs such as Facebook from traditional websites is an active participation of its users. In order to encourage interaction Web 2.0 applications typically include a wide range of performative functions, allowing participants to continually react to information, modify (update, delete, refine) their own and others' performances, create new threads of information, enlarge or reduce their personal network, etc. On Facebook, for instance, where a continuous News Feed reveals all details of one's online behaviour to other members of one's online network(s), users are increasingly urged to reshape their behaviour as what E.J. Westlake calls 'unique performances of an online self' (Westlake 2008, 23). Operating within this particular online performative community, the people working on *1944 LIVE* must have been very concerned about the effect the online behaviour of their fake profiles would have when being exposed to the 'fluid performances' (Westlake 2008, 23) of real people.<sup>16</sup> According to Westlake, the practice of creating fake profiles, although it is explicitly forbidden according to the website's 'Terms of Use', is among the most performative on Facebook (2008, 28-29). In the case of *1944 LIVE* this was all the more so, as these profiles additionally pretended to 'exist' in a distant era. Yet, as Stefan Schutt reminds with reference to the general phenomenon of 'performing' real life stories on the online 'stage', 'when seen as performances, it doesn't matter how 'true' life stories are' (Schutt 2008, 296). '[F]or a performance to be successful', he continues quoting Marie McLean, 'it is not enough for it to have purpose; it must have *energy and effect*' (296; my italics). In other words, if truthfulness is less important for a performance to be successful than energy and effect, completely fake life stories *can* actually be as effective in conveying the memory of a certain event as real testimonies, as long as they are successfully *performed*.

When looking more closely at the campaign, it is exactly this concern for a successful (energetic, effective) performance that appears to have guided the people at San Markos. In a retrospective article on the project, the agency's creative directors recount the various strategies they had at their disposal in order to construct 'effective' identities for both profiles and to modify the evolution of the overall commemorative narrative they created. First of all, behind each of the protagonists stood one particular copywriter of the same sex; these copywriters were responsible for most of the online performances that were carried out by their profiles throughout the project. The empathy the copywriters had to invest in order to bring their alter egos to life even caused a temporary mental crisis of one of them (Chojnacki and Berger 2010, 13). Furthermore, the project departed from a preliminary scenario, which was further modified throughout the campaign. Another problem was the monitoring of the profiles: as the popularity of Kostek and Sosna grew and Poles from all over the world started reacting to their posts, the team behind the project had to constantly moderate the discussions. As a result, the number of people in the project grew from six to almost thirty. Finally, in order to keep attracting attention from the users for more than sixty days, the team con-

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<sup>16</sup> The creative directors of San Markos confirm that especially the first status updates by Kostek and Sosna were posted with a certain fear of the reactions that would follow (Chojnacki and Berger 2010, 13).

tinually had to come up with new ‘events’ such as sudden dramatic twists, the introduction of a new character, and so on (Chojnacki and Berger 2010).

The most important indicator of the performative effectiveness of the project is, of course, the degree of interaction among the members of the target group. More important than the total number of friends of Kostek and Sosna is the (national, geographical, generational, ideological, etc.) composition of the community, and also the frequency and content of the online reactions to the project. Unlike the Henio Żytomirski project (cf. *infra*), the *1944 LIVE* campaign almost exclusively attracted Poles (both domestic and diasporic) of several ages and with various ideological preferences. The main reason for this might be that the Warsaw Rising is first and foremost a national trauma that affects all Poles irrespective of their age and background. As a consequence, almost all communication on the profiles involved is in Polish, and hardly anyone seems to complain that in this form the project will never reach other nationalities. Even more, one might risk the hypothesis that this situation is exactly what makes the entire commemorative performance so successful. Although the Polish project operates on what is perhaps the most global SNS, the friends-only access to both profiles and, more importantly, the almost exclusive use of Polish within the community turn it into some kind of ‘micronational’ virtual network of initiated Poles. This typically Eastern European atmosphere of ‘national intimacy’, to use a term coined by Aniko Imre (2009), strengthens the community bonds between its users and undoubtedly entices them to a kind of national performance which would be different when issued within a larger, truly transnational, and English-speaking virtual environment.

When taking a closer look at the rich hypertext that has resulted from *1944 LIVE*, one of the first things that catches the eye is the high degree of ‘readerly participation’ (Westlake 2008, 26). Unlike what generally happens on ‘normal’ Facebook profiles this interaction exceeds the common practices of pushing the ‘like this’ button and reiterating or modifying the comments that others have left. When browsing through the extensive correspondence it becomes clear that, apart from the numerous casual remarks made by accidental passers-by, a number of people took on particular ‘roles’ in the evolving narrative through interventions on an almost daily basis. As to the type of their reactions, a distinction could be made between serious remarks and discussions about the sense (or the lack thereof) of the Rising and about particular episodes mentioned by Kostek and Sosna on the one hand, and more playful reactions contributing to the quotidian character of the story on the other. Among the more playful motives is undoubtedly Sosna’s jealousy of a nurse who is taking care of Kostek after he has been wounded. As she complains about this in a Wall post on 19 August, she receives typical reactions such as ‘that is sufficient reason for the outbreak of yet another uprising :)’ (‘to wystarczający powód do wybuchu kolejnego powstania :)’). The degree of empathy with the protagonists reaches its peak when Kostek is finally arrested and when Sosna is killed while climbing out of the sewers through which she was trying to escape. Especially Sosna’s death on 27 September results in an avalanche of comments, ranging from mere emoticons, over manifestations of disbelief (‘Nie wierzę’ [‘I don’t believe it’]) to complaints about the untimely ending of the narrative (‘SOSNA! Nie odchodź od nas....masz nam tyle do opowiedzenia’ [‘SOSNA! Don’t leave us now....there is so much left to tell us’]).

No matter how pathetic these last examples may seem, most people who actively took part in the project were well aware of the performative nature of their online activities. This

self-awareness is most evident in the reflexive comments on the Facebook format that keep reappearing throughout the entire narrative. An excellent example is the ongoing discussion about the function of the ‘like this’ button. Each time someone remarks that it is rather inappropriate to ‘like’ certain tragic developments, other users assure that in this context it rather means ‘I’m with You’ (‘Jestem z Tobą’). Yet, the problem remains that the overt artificiality (despite the performative effectiveness) and the remarkable playfulness (despite the seriousness of certain discussions) of the project somehow collide with the catastrophic nature of the event which is being remembered. Although this kind of empathy with the traumatic past of former generations is perhaps the only kind that is achievable for practitioners of what Marianne Hirsch has called ‘postmemory’ (2002), critics of the various pop cultural forms of Warsaw Rising commemoration have voiced similar objections against the banalisation and commodification of tragic history that these recent practices might yield.

However important this general discussion may be, we should not forget that this type of online commemoration threatens the process of remembrance in yet another, more technical way. Indeed, when compared to traditional media such as films, photographs, and written testimonies, the material existence of online commemorative communities is far from stable. First of all, as particular combinations of private and public activities, these online practices result in fluid hypertexts which contain traces of both the process and the product of the various interconnected performances of the self. As a consequence, the archive of these commemorative ‘events’, though it is always partly retrievable, becomes almost completely irrelevant. An additional complication resulting from the particular architecture of SNSs such as Facebook is what I would call the inversion of chronology: as the most recent activities are placed on top of the News Feed or Wall, the particular narratives that are being written gradually efface themselves and eventually even ‘forget’ their own prehistory. In the case of *1944 LIVE*, this effacement of history can be taken quite literally, as it appears to be technically difficult, not to say almost impossible to return to the very beginning (or, in fact, end) of the profiles’ Walls: due to the enormous number of comments, clicking ‘back’ to the older posts gradually slows down in the course of time – to the point that the system freezes and cannot be operated any longer. In other words, what seemed to be one of the advantages of this particular commemorative form – its ability to completely merge distant temporalities into a virtual now – turns out to be one of its main deficiencies. What the case of *1944 LIVE* illustrates is exactly the contemporary problem of history becoming mere memory: a transitory experience in the present.

### **Henio Żytomirski: A Real Mate From the Past**

On 18 August 2009, only a few weeks after the *1944 LIVE* project had been launched, another ‘fake’ profile appeared on Polish Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/henio.zytomirski>). The profile allegedly belonged to Henio Żytomirski, a Polish boy of Jewish descent who was born on 23 March 1933 in Lublin (East Poland), where he lived with his parents until the early 1940s. In 1942 he was deported together with his father to the nearby Majdanek death camp, where he was probably killed instantly by the Nazis. The profile is a mixture of first-person everyday comments from the standpoint of Henio and third-person background information on the young boy and his fam-

ily. This (auto)biographical narrative is accompanied with authentic photographic material, including pictures from the historical Henio that have been preserved. The boy's profile picture was taken just before the outbreak of World War II, and the juxtaposition of an innocently smiling seven-year-old boy with the harsh reality of his personal fate lends this photograph iconic value (see Figure 3). The project was set up by the 'Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre' Cultural Centre in Lublin. The fake profile of Henio in some way is a continuation of the artistic-educational project *Listy do Henia* ('Letters to Henio'), which has been organised by the Centre since 2005 on the occasion of the yearly Polish 'Day of Holocaust Remembrance and Counteracting Crimes against Humanity' on 19 April. On this day, young inhabitants of Lublin are invited to write letters to Henio and post them in a special mailbox located at the same place where Henio's iconic picture was taken. After a few days, the letter is returned with an annotation of the type 'addressee unknown'.

**Figure 3.** Screen grab of the Henio Żytomirski profile Info page.

The screenshot shows a Facebook profile for Henio Żytomirski. The profile picture is a black and white photograph of a young boy in a white shirt and shorts. The page includes sections for 'About Me', 'Basic Info', 'Likes and Interests', and 'Contact Information'. The 'Basic Info' section shows: Sex: Male, Birthday: March 25, 1933, Looking For: Friendship. The 'Likes and Interests' section lists 'Brama Grodzka (Grodzka Gate)'. The 'Contact Information' section provides: Email: heniozytomirski@gmail.com, Website: http://www.tnn.pl/pamiej.php?kat=3385, and Facebook Profile: http://www.facebook.com/henio.zytomirski. There is also a small bio text: 'Behind this seemingly casual photo there is the life story of a little Jewish boy, born in 1933 in Lublin, whose name was Henio Żytomirski.'

Source: <http://www.facebook.com/henio.zytomirski> (accessed 9 July 2010). This profile is no longer accessible.

The various projects in remembrance of Henio Żytomirski are illustrative of most of the activities of the 'Grodzka Gate' Centre. Lublin used to be a crossroads of different cultures, with a Jewish population of about one third at the time when World War II broke out. After the devastations of war and Holocaust the city in a way forgot about its own past. The aim of the Centre is to save and retrieve Lublin's rich cultural and historical heritage from oblivion. Although the strategy of focusing on the forms of Holocaust remembrance of individual victims' biographies is not original at all, it has recently become particularly popular in Poland, where the remembrance of the the Holocaust has always been a difficult issue due to the unresolved debate on Polish-Jewish relations. Apart from the activities of the 'Grodzka Gate'

Centre, the multimedial project *I miss you, Jew! (Tęsknię za Tobą, Żydzie!)* (‘’) could be mentioned, which combines Internet discussions with photography and graffiti art in order to collect memories of concrete Jewish individuals who once lived in Poland (<http://www.tesknie.com/index.php?id=32>). The importance of such local initiatives for the future of tolerance in Poland should not be underestimated, as anti-Semitism is still in force in present-day Polish society. By focusing less on distinctions between ethnic groups and more on individual life stories and shared past experiences, historical memory of this traumatic past is likely to become less biased than today.

Although the Facebook campaign in honour of Henio has a lot in common with the *1944 LIVE* project, there are also considerable differences between both with regard to their performative effectiveness and commemorative functions. First of all, although the Henio profile invites interaction among its visitors, it functions more as an online shrine or virtual museum that collects both biographical data on Henio and the immediate readerly reactions to the various items. Due to the lack of multiple protagonists and the absence of a tension arc, there has also been a clear evolution in the commemorative practices of the community. In the very beginning, different types of participation were encouraged by the regular first-person status updates. As the language of the profile was Polish, most people participated in Polish, though soon reactions in other languages started to pop up. The reactions ranged from general appeals to keep remembering the Holocaust over typical expressions of compassion to more playful engagements with the central character – including the use of typical Facebook applications such as all kinds of virtual gift deliverers. Unlike Kostek and Sosna, however, Henio did not further respond to these reactions. This was, of course, a deliberate strategy: in a similar way as the letters to Henio that were returned because of an unknown addressee, the absence of direct reactions to what is happening on the profile should make the visitors aware of the existential and temporal gap that yawns between them and the young boy. Yet, by imposing this kind of limits on the performativity of the medium, not only the readerly participation is likely to abate, but also the ‘authorial’ control over the community’s hypertext and its commemorative practices is seriously threatened.

One of the strategies that the Henio profile developed against the imminent decrease of readers’ interest was the translation (as from 29 December 2009) of its main narrative thread in English. As a result, the profile in some way entered into a new phase, with a hypertext that on the one hand became completely international (e.g. comments in less obvious languages such as Portuguese, Hungarian, Croatian, Dutch, Japanese, etc.), but on the other almost completely detached itself from the local context within which it was supposed to function. One could posit that the ‘national intimacy’ that until then had surrounded the project to a certain extent was now completely scattered. What was left of the project was an ever growing (and as a consequence increasingly self-effacing) archive of casual comments rather than a finite and collective online commemorative ‘event’ that makes the fullest use of the performative possibilities of the medium. The gradual dissolution of the campaign became particularly evident around the time of Henio’s birthday on 25 March 2010, when someone set up ‘Henio Zytomirski Page – No Limited Profile’ (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Henio-Zytomirski-Page-No-Limited-Profile/113504528659885>), a parallel fan page for Henio’s friends which continued the activities of the profile, but mainly in Spanish and without any restrictions such as friends-only access to certain contents (see Figure 4). In

other words, although the Henio Żytomirski profile benefits more from the global reach of SNSs such as Facebook in order to establish a truly transnational ‘community of pain’, it is clearly less successful in maintaining its performative effectiveness and imaginative profundity than *1944 LIVE*.

**Figure 4.** Screen grab of the “Henio Żytomirski Page – No Limited Profile” Wall.



Source: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Henio-Zytomirski-Page-No-Limited-Profile/113504528659885> (accessed 9 July 2010).

## Conclusion

A typical explanation for the differences between *1944 LIVE* and the Henio profile would be the varying historical contexts which they evoke. The increasing globalisation and subsequent dissolution which I have just described is indeed more difficult to avoid in the case of a project dedicated to a real Holocaust victim than in the case of two fictitious Warsaw insurgents. Although the representation of the Holocaust has already entered contemporary mass culture in various guises, the fear of ‘desacralising’ its memory is still considerable. In other words, each particular commemorative initiative will always derive part of its success from the degree to which it resists accusations of banalisation and commodification. Yet, leaving the effect of a varying historical and commemorative context aside, my analysis of the performative features of both projects adds some new elements to the discussion. As soon as the emphasis is on the successfulness of such (re)mediations of cultural memory as a particular commemorative performance (on their durability and impact – their *energy* and *effect*), then other, more process-oriented functions and dysfunctions may come to the surface. Of the two projects, *1944 LIVE* has adopted the sociotechnical practices of the medium most fully. The Henio page, although certainly displaying some of the typical Facebook gestures, tends to

‘behave’ as a fan page rather than as a profile page, and as such loses a lot of its credibility. In other words, the truthfulness of online performances on Facebook is less important than their reliability, as a result of which fake profiles offering socially acceptable performances of the self tend to be more successful than real profiles displaying deviant behaviour.<sup>17</sup> To conclude, what we can learn from this kind of memorial practices with an ‘enhanced’ performativity, is an awareness of the ‘mediatedness’ of any articulation of cultural memory and, more significantly, the importance of a successful mediation in order to render its consumers a valuable, ‘prosthetic’ mnemonic experience.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Westlake (2008) for an interesting evaluation of Facebook as ‘a forum for the policing and establishing of normative behavior’ rather than as ‘the imagined forum of deviant exhibitionism’ (35).



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