

'Pamiątki' Materialising Pilgrimages Past

Aimée Joyce

'What makes photography a strange invention is that its primary raw materials are light and time' (Berger & Mohr 1982, 85)

56

By the time I had finished fieldwork I had amassed a significant collection of pamiątki; souvenirs ranging in form from a small plastic statue of the Virgin Mary to cards containing images of saints and Cyrillic script. In this paper I want to focus on one set of pamiątki, collaged photographs, I received and later lost and more broadly on the 'temporal multilayeredness of the photographic image' (Baetens, Streitberger, Van Gelder, 2010; viii). The photographs I am exploring here are pamiątki in the broadest sense. Pamiątki can be translated as keepsake, souvenir, gift or memorabilia, but the word often carries two or more of these meanings at once; in this paper I use pamiątki to suggest all of the above connotations.

The photographs – souvenir photo collages from a set of pilgrimages – were gifted to me by Bogdan, a respondent for whom they had long been problematic keepsakes. Bogdan's wife died many years before I came to the town on the Polish/

Belarusian border where I conducted my fieldwork. When I met him he lived in an old style wooden house, common to this part of Poland about 100 years ago. Since the death of his wife he had not redecorated his home; it was still bedecked in floral



57

wall paper and white lace curtains. Everywhere the absence of his wife was palpable; even in the well-worn second chair in the living room, positioned under a lit-up image of the Holy Mother. He bought the unusual illuminated icon of the Holy Mother of Lichen for his wife on the only pilgrimage he ever made with her and he turned on the tiny twinkling multi-coloured lights each day. What may have seemed “kitsch” in another situation,

refuse to take such personal objects, but Bogdan insisted more obstinately. Finally he put the badges away, but as part of his concession handed me three photo collages intensely marked with the patina of time. Later I took these images back to Bogdan and then to an ever expanding circle of the town's older residents, attempting to establish their context. During their travels around the town the photographs disappeared. I came to understand the collages as objects with much more complex temporal layers than the simple 'slice of time' model I had been attempting to understand them through.

The 'slice of time' model is based on the idea that each photograph captures a fleeting moment of time and has been a popular concept since the arrival of photography. In the mid-nineteenth century when Talbot and Muybridge were attempting to capture moments on film they were part of a wider scientific community engaged in the practice of 'producing knowledge about the (moving and ephemeral) world through (static and stable) image making' (Ramalingam, 2010; 3). Through photographs entanglement in the science of ephemera the 'slice of time' model of these images emerged. But the reality of photographs and time is more complex. Each image is not just embedded with the ephemeral moment but within other grammars of time. Depending on its presentation, photography can speak in the past perfect or continuous or even in the present. If a photograph contains a complex grammar of time it allows us to challenge Barthes' contestation that 'Not only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory (...the tense of the Photograph is the aorist¹),

but it actually blocks memory, quickly becoming a counter memory.’ (1981; 91) Batchen has suggested that the danger of purely visual images replacing multi-sensory memories can be eluded by “doing something” to the photographs (2004). The pamiątki I am discussing are a particularly interesting example of how collaging and ordering many smaller photographs, diverse in time and space, can create poly-temporal images which specifically act to evoke complex relational memories, not subdue them.

60

Bogdan gave me three collages. The first image had no date, but there was writing across the centre of the picture and this gave it a place. At first there was no clue to the collage’s historical province other than its aged appearance. The writing on the left hand side informed me that the photograph of the carving of the woman above was a “miraculous image” from the “Sanctuary of Our Lady of Sorrows, Queen of Poland, Old Lichen, near Konin”. The rest of the text identified the photograph of the stone building topped by a crucifix as “Golgotha, part of the stations of the cross” and the photograph of the long memorial wall as a “National Memorial”. In the last section of text was a story of a war-like miracle. The text identified the image of a crucifix as the “Miraculous image of Christ Crucified, which in the year 1944 was shot blasphemously by Bert Bauer, a Hitler youth counsellor. He was killed by bullets a few hours after he made the sacrilege”. Here, then, the addition of text to the image began to peel back some of the temporal layers. Bogdan recalled that this image was not from an official walking pilgrimage, but an unofficial “car

pilgrimage” his wife had made with her prayer group. Looking into the photo he also saw beyond it, and told me later, after socialism, he went to Lichen with his wife on pilgrimage but this time brought back the light-up Virgin of Lichen plaque as a pamiątka. The photo also summons memories of World War II, especially the text referring to the miracle of the crucifix, suggesting a heroic narrative of the War. For Bogdan though the collage recalled the aftermath, the realisation of just how much death Poland had endured, evoked by the image of the wall with the names of the concentration camps ringed in barbed wire and the late heroes of the Polish Resistance engraved into it. The text suggests an attempt to create an official narrative for this photograph. However in combination with the images and the text visible within the collage, it is clear no straightforward linear or heroic narrative can be imposed.

61

There was much less text in this second image. The only text it contained stated that this collage remembers the “300 years Jubilee of Our Lady of Leśniańskiej” and gives the date. This image contains more small photographs organised in a somewhat unbalanced grid. One of the problems of photographs without explanatory footnotes is that they become difficult to place or understand. Batchen has said that the organisation of photographs into grids identified with the addition of a written epitaphs create a sense of shared identity between the images. He continues by saying that if the grid is incomplete or more akin to a collage (containing many diverse types of smaller photographs) the emphasis on cohesion is broken and instead the image evokes a

range of memories by allowing the viewer to look outside their social group and consider the wider world (2004). Bogdan could recall certain things from this image; that the pilgrims from Łukow had all been “children” strictly “but fairly” minded by a set of nuns and priests, even though it was rare during the Socialist period for priest to be allowed to travel with students. More of my respondents could identify other aspects of the collage. For example the name of the cardinal on the right hand side, or the parade that involved dressage horses. Despite the images that he did not recognise Bogdan was still able to tell a story of the pilgrimage. Polte, writing on photography, has examined the role the ordering of photographs plays in understanding them (2010). Order becomes an instrument of meaning, so when Bogdan looked at the pamiątki he saw a narrative track leading from one image to the next. Polte describes how we substitute an imagined or remembered story into the gaps between the various photographs ordered in front of our eyes (2010). When Bogdan looked at this pamiątki he recalled the pilgrimage, the carved stone icon and the beautifully decorated church that contained it, the vast number of pilgrims, the outdoor mass, the number of clergy and veteran soldiers present and the parade that ended at a specially made platform where a choir performed beautiful hymns and the lay ministers of the Eucharist stood guard. This feat of memory was made more impressive as he had not attended the pilgrimage but was recalling his wife’s stories of the day; an effect of a collaged memory? In fact he stated he would not have remembered so well had he not been looking at the pamiątki.

The final image simply stated “Our Lady visits Kościół” and gave the date. Yet this pamiątki was the most problematic. This pamiątki was the most aged of all, despite its date indicating it was the youngest. This was, Bogdan recalled, because it was his wife’s favourite and she kept it pinned to the wall for many years. The collage bore the scars of this time on the wall, as did the other two, holes in the corner indicating thumb tacks. But unlike the other two pamiątki this one also had the distinctive yellowing caused by many years of exposure to harsh daylight. Somehow this aging moved me more than anything, the realisation of how proud Bogdan’s wife had been of this collage, how long it had held prime position on the wall of their home. There were two reasons Bogdan’s wife loved this photo: firstly it recalled an important event that happened in her town and secondly in the top right hand corner there was an image of Cardinal Wojtyła, later the much beloved Polish Pope John Paul II. However this image of the Cardinal is where the pamiątki becomes problematic. By 1985, the date on the collage, Cardinal Wojtyła was already Pope, and he did not visit Poland in that year. The pope had been in Poland in 1979 and 1983 but did not visit Kościół as he had visited before as Cardinal, in 1963 and 1977. It is perhaps an image from one of these visits that has been added to this collage. Commenting on photographic albums Langford has warned of issues like this (2001). She points out that the problem of seeing order as a guide to meaning is that even when there is no ‘real’ connection between a set of photographs, the act of putting them together forces us to imagine relationships between them. In this instance the addition of a photograph from an earlier period leads us to

believe that Pope John Paul II had been in attendance at this later event. Langford concludes by proffering that when looking at the manner in which photographs are ordered 'we find a style of photographic exposition that is never linear, but idiosyncratic, meandering, stubbornly non-Aristotelian' (2001, 20). Yet Bogdan still remembered through this photo, not just the visit, but the protective manner in which his wife moved it about the walls of the house, avoiding damp patches or moving it so that it was visible to all who entered.

64

When I first received this set of pamiątki I was aware that they were "heavy objects". When I began to look at them as historic documents this weight became even more pronounced. For Bogdan they carried the heft of remembering that his wife had an active religious life in which he had not participated. Bogdan refused to allow me to return the collages when I was leaving my fieldsite. In the two years since I left my fieldsite I have moved country twice and home more times than I care to think. During one of these moves the collages disappeared, I emptied all my boxes of notes and the one box I kept specifically for pamiątki but they were simply not there.

Since their loss the collages have become heavy objects for me too, occasionally intruding into my thoughts leading me to feel careless and reminding me of Bogdan and our interactions based on the images. Their meaning has become complicated as their loss, and absence has tangled them into my life. These collages were produced as pamiątki, memorials, by someone

aware that what was then a fresh moment would soon become a hazy memory difficult to pinpoint. Still the collages go beyond the photographs contained within them – they are not pale reifications of a moment in time – they are images that conjure many different times and tenses at once. To make sense of them we start from our position within a specific set of relationships, and in them we see a set of relationships made invisible by the passing of time. Through evoking memories pamiątki live in the past but they remind us of what is missing in the present and as such find a space for themselves in the “absent presences” of the viewer. Perhaps the strangest thing about Bogdan’s collages is I recall the order of the photographs that constituted them, without recalling the photographs themselves. Things of light and time (Berger and Mohr 1982) they have already faded into the past.

65

Works Cited

- Baetens, J., A. Streitberger and H. Van Gelder. 2010 *Time and Photography*. Belgium; Leuvan University Press.
- Barthes, R. 1981 *Camera Lucida*. London; Cape
- Batchen, G. 2004 *Forget Me Not; photography and remembrance*. Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum.
- Berger & Mohr, 1982 *Another Way of Seeing*. London; Writers and Readers.
- Langford, M. 2001 *Suspended Conversations; the afterlife of memory in photographic albums*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Polte, M. 2010 'Time and Order: Self-reflective Strategies in Photo Essays'. In Baetens, Streitberger & Van Gelder. *Time and Photography*. Belgium; Leuvan University Press.

Ramalingam, C. 2010 'Fixing Transience: Photography and other Images of Time in 1830s London'. In Baetens, Streitberger & Van Gelder. *Time and Photography*. Belgium; Leuvan University Press.

Notes

¹ Simple or undivided tense