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Caftanism, Instead of the Oblivion

The following research is based on the existing contributions in the domain of the memory studies and notion of fine difference between processes of memorising, remembering and forgetting. After a brief introduction to the meaning of terms crucial for the cultural memory and their use in the identity construction process, this theoretical frame will be further analysed through the observation of my grandmothers' Ashkenazi-born Belgradian, family photo album as a particular figure of memory. Realizing that this photo album does not reveal neither one image of Holocaust and tragic memories, while my grandmother did remember these, a contribution to the cultures of memory theory will be offered and explained through the metaphor of caftan. When unaccepted, it seems as we create robes to hide fragments of our identity under the caftan, everything our social surrounding would not like, or aspects about ourselves we do not want to present. Proposing this term to the cultural memory studies, *caftanism* would refer to the socially constructed oblivion, which is completely different than the real, literal forgetting.

Key words: caftanism, memory, forgetting, remembrance, identity construction

Кафтанизам, уместо заборав

Истраживање пред нама у оквирима је теорије култура сећања и посебно је фокусирано на разлике између значења појмова памћења, сећања и заборављања. Након кратког осврта на употребу ових појмова у процесима конструисања идентитета, овај теоријски оквир биће додатно испитан

кроз пример приватног фото-албума као фигуре сећања који је припадао ауторкиној баки, Београђанки рођеној у породици Ашкенази Јевреја. Схватајући да овај фото-албум не открива ни једну слику Холокауста и трагичних успомена иако их се његова протагонисткиња сећала, допринос теорији културе сећања биће понуђен и објашњен помоћу метафоре кафтана. Наиме, чини се да фрагменте свог идентитета, све што се нашем друштвеном окружењу не би допало или аспекте о себи које не желимо да представимо, ми кријемо испод својеврсног кафтана. У раду је стога теорији култура сећања предложен термин *кафџанизам* као друштвено конструисани заборав, који је потпуно другачији од стварног, дословног заборава.

Кључне речи: кафтананизам, сећање, памћење, заборав, конструисање идентитета

INTRODUCTION

This paper will be based on the existing approaches to the researches in the domain of the cultural memory studies as a specific field of interest to theoreticians coming from various backgrounds. After the short mention of the key researchers, explanation of the main concepts of this theory and reasons for it, a contribution to the cultural memory theory will be offered and illustratively explained through a case study – a family photo-album from my grandmother and a representation of her identity through the construction of visual memories.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF CRUCIAL CONCEPTS OF THE MEMORY STUDIES

Memory studies and a discussion on the cultural memory find the base in ideas of Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist and philosopher who developed concepts of the *social frames of memory* (Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire) (Halbwachs 1994)¹ and the *collective memory* (La mémoire collective) (Halbwachs 1997).² His main contribution was in focusing for the first time on the problem of memory as the one influenced by socio-cultural aspects and being constructed by a particular group of people. He stressed the socio-integrative potential of the memory as well as the idea that the memory of one group is being changed with the shift of circumstances, so there are as many collective memories as social groups. Halbwachs' ideas,

¹ The first edition is from 1925.

² The first edition is from 1952.

that he developed in the Mid-20th century, were recognised and become popular and influencfull in the last two decades of the same century.

Aleida Assmann, a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Konstanz in Germany, as well as Jan Assmann, professor of Religious and Cultural Theory at the same University, were one of the first to develop Halbwachs' ideas further, focusing their researches on the notion of *cultural memory* and particular *figures of memory*, analysing case studies in their fields of interest. These authors see the cultural memory as a manner of keeping the continuity of the society, a collective knowledge which is transmitted from one generation to another (Asman, A. 2011,³ Assmann J. 1995) and which helps generations reconstruct their own cultural identity (Kuljić 2006). Therefore, Aleida and Jan Assmann focus research on the processes of transmission of knowledge and the ways of this transmission, proposing a mentioned concept of the *figures of memory* – carriers of memory contents such as rituals, texts, photos or monuments.⁴ In this paper we will see how a family photo album might appear as a particular figure of cultural memory.

On the other hand, a French historian Pierre Nora was influenced as well by thoughts of Maurice Halbwachs developing the idea on the *realms of memory* (Nora 1997), while many other European researchers still contribute to the discussion on the socially constructed memory. Therefore, it is important to stress that, *cultural memory* is recognised in the field of cultural studies, at the same time differing from biological, cognitive, psychological and neurological observation of the phenomenon of the human memory. The interpretation of the cultural memory is bond to different disciplines and consequently to different methodologies of research,

As memory studies are today a subject of the analyses of many researches, there is no one universal terminology accepted when speaking on crucial terms for this theory, but definitions vary from one language to another while translations complicate the situation even more. Consequently, when translating and making a compendium of many papers referring to the memory studies written by authors from different parts of the world in the last couple of decays, editors Michal Sladeček, Jelena Vasiljević and Tamara Petrović Trifunović admitted in the preface of the edition: *Collective memory and politics of the remembrance* (Sladeček et al. 2015) that they couldn't find an equal solution for the use of the two

³ The first, German edition is from 1985.

⁴ Developing the idea of MATERIALIZATION of memory introduced by Aby Warburg (1997) Warburg, *Introduction to the Mnemosyne Atlas*, transl. by Rampley, 1997.

terms: memory and remembrance in all the speaking areas. Also, the translation of these two into other languages,⁵ as above-mentioned authors argue, often makes confusion because of the opponent meanings of one term in the same language depending on the author and his research background, but also depending on the translation. Finally, the mentioned editors find even an advantage in this differing use of terms crucial for the topic as it keeps researches (re)questioning, articulating and comparing their assumptions (Sladeček et al. 2015, 7-29).

All the theoreticians agree upon the fact that there is a fine difference between the processes of *memorizing* and *remembering*. We will now define both for the purposes of this paper, leaving also the space for further comments and development in some following research projects. Therefore, the term *memory* we will use for “raw, passive material” we care in our mind which needs to be examined in order to be turned into a document. *Remembrance*, on the other hand is then an “externalized memory”, the socially constructed memory. The remembrance, according to Fernando Catroga, stops being the memory when archived, as it parts from the only mediator who could bring him to life, that is, from the subject (Katroga 2011, 19). On the other hand, Assmann considers that memory includes not only the involuntary perception, but unconscious reaction as well, while remembering represents the premeditated attitude towards the past, more related to the media that conserve and transfer content of the past: “The memory puts the selected content of the past into a rational system and makes consonance in accepting and interpreting the world, not just by keeping the certain contents, but also by forgetting the others.” (Asman J. 2011, 34) The remembrance therefore, cannot be developed without the existence of the inner (mental) inscriptions, which could be enliven by the external, material, social and symbolical reliance, particular figures of memories we already have mentioned.

It is important to point out that, these processes of the selection of the past content which will be preserved for future generations and refusal of the ones which are not convenient for the relevant socio-cultural circumstances, are processes of the *identity construction* and representation to others. Maurice Halbwachs’ suggestions were that contents of memory are not some particular and invariable referential points, but they change together with social and political conditions. This is considered for a con-

⁵ Just to mention a few crucial authors widely translated from: French - Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora; German - Jan and Aleida Assmann, English - John Locke, David W. Bleit; Spanish - Fernando Catroga etc.

structive power of a memory: silently, we are ready to adjust memories to the values in accordance with the actual image of our self (Halbwachs 2006, 21). Agreeing upon conclusions given, a sociologist Todor Kuljić stresses: "The idea of the identity, it's becoming and surviving, is not separable from ideas of memory, remembrance and reference to the past, or from the history and tradition, and changes of perception of the time and space which are brought by different ideological backgrounds and technical inventions." (Kuljić 2006, 151)

By now, we could conclude that cultural memory is composed equally of remembering of the selected contents as well as forgetting some which an individual does not want to represent to others when constructing the (social) identity. Still, can we simply name the process of hiding contents of the past and individuals' rejection to represent some images of the past to others – the process of forgetting? Before discussing more about this, it is important for this research as well to understand reasons for so much interest to cultural memory in the last few decades.

THE MEMORY BOOM AND REASONS FOR IT

The last two decades of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty first century are characterized by the great interest to the individual mementos and the memory of smaller groups which have rarely been heard before, in the ages of dominant ideologies and histories *written by the winners*. However, in the last couple of decades social scientists, as we have already seen, had a lot to add in the field we now recognize as memory studies, while the interest to intimate memories is recognized as well in artistic expression, philosophical reflections, but also used in political actions and in affirmation of the cultural identity. The end of the previous century therefore, shows more interest to Foucauldian "counter-memory" of some non-dominant social groups, revealing that the constructed history cannot substitute live, authentic witnessing (Foucault 1997, 140-164). The question: 'Why the *memory boom*?' we can reformulate in: 'Why the (dominant) history is not enough?' or 'Why is there a discontent with the history?' In many answers recognized between European and researches from the United States, such as: the end of the Cold War, the rising awareness on the important anniversaries, tourism and memory as a commodity, multiculturalism and museum controversies, to name just a few, theoreticians also agree upon the conclusion that the Holocaust is the reason for the explosion of the interest for the individual memories. Disaster of this scale, happening for the first time in modern history, has taken off layers of culture following thousands of dead, while many documents which would be official arguments had al-

so been destroyed. Therefore, during their researches, historians needed to pay attention to the, unfortunately few, living witnesses who survived the Holocaust, and to their memories (Blajt 2015, 335-340).

The catastrophe of this scale is also important when thinking of the representation of the identity of the ones who survived trauma. Writing about social constructivism as a phenomenon of a social psychology,⁶ Vivien Beer answers the question: what does the presumption that a person is socially constructed should mean? Humans are social beings and they can only be found in the society, she argues. "The thing that makes us be a person is not our inner essence, but discursive creations which represent a product of social interaction." (Ber 2001, 19) It could therefore be said that we construct our own versions of different realities (as culture or society) between ourselves. In order to explain better the construction of the individual identity, the socio-constructive theory uses the notion of *discourse*. Discourse refers to an assembly of meanings, metaphors, representations, stories, images etc. that, together produce a particular version of some event. If we understand discourse as a particular image or picture of an event, then it is clear that there are many more alternative versions of an event. Therefore, a subject – person, can be surrounded with many different discourses while all these tell the story about the given object and present it differently to the world. Specific discourse might give the illusion that it keeps pretensions right for truth. Of course, different words, pictures, expressions can be part of different discourses, whilst, every time those create different narratives. Identity is, therefore, constructed with the use of discourses we manipulate with, in the frameworks of our culture which we use while communicating with others.

As a crucial event that changed her life, we will see that the Holocaust is also an important discourse for my grandmothers' life and identity construction while memories on this event are the ones which influenced her living in post-war Belgrade a lot, even though she suppressed them deeply in herself.

GRANDMOTHERS' PHOTO ALBUM AS AN EXAMPLE OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Agreeing upon the argument that identity is the question of memorizing, reactivation and reconciliation of the sense (Riceour 1992, 115), the theoretical perspective of memory studies will be used as a tool for read-

⁶ Which is a product of combined influences of authors from different fields such as: sociology, psychology, postmodern art and art theory.

ing the personal family mementos, or to be more precise, memories my grandmothers' photo album as a particular figure of memory, reveals or avoids in her identity representation.

If we accept that the mentioned discourses or figures of memory are different images to which we attach associations to the previous happenings, it is then easy to observe a family photo album constituted of literal images – photos, as one way of the identity construction. In the context of the cultural memory theory, it is also interesting to understand the meaning of the term *album* (lat. *albus, tabula rasa*). The word itself denotes whiteness, white table to write something on, and a nicely decorated notebook to remember things. Only with time did this word gain meaning of notebook for collecting photos, stamps, newspapers, articles. Therefore, the album, from the very idea of its existence, can and must be understood as a deliberate monument, the one whose goal is not ever to allow certain moment to become the past, but to keep it present and alive in the conscience of those who are yet to come (Rigl 2006, 20-51).

The 19th century family photo album was a representative form which was meant to point out the family position within the social context. Hence, in this particular family museum, what actually was constructed is the idea of a perfect family identity represented to the public. With its internal structure and impressive code of photos, family album was a visual mediator that articulated, symbolically, both: the relations inside the family and the class in the 19th century society. As a part of a private sphere, its purpose was the communication to the public with a principal task to offer well adorned image of a peaceful bourgeois life and the sweet family home.⁷

Consequently, in my grandmother's album, as well as in other 19th century albums, the Zidverc family⁸ line, presented on the pages of the old photo album with thick leather cover and beautiful handmade decoration, has its father and founder, its "milestone" who is shown on the first page. The representative portrait of the father of the family, Jonatan Zidverc, presented in his entire figure in a neat black suit, with a high white collar, black gloves and a hat in his hand. His photo with a severe facial expression and the moustache, is stuck on a hard carton pad with an in-

⁷ More on the analyses of the family photo album through the lens of memory studies and the roll of photography in personal memories preservation. (Gnjatović, 2017, 433-449)

⁸ Zidverc family living in Belgrade in the second half of the 19th century is the second generation of Ashkenazi Jewish family which moved from Poland and settled in Serbia. Just few members of this numerous family have survived the Second World War.

scription: *Princess Portrait*. This is the image of the father's position in the family, but in the society as well. The visual message of this cabinet card and its distinguished, leading position in a symbolic chain of images confirms the patriarchal ideology where the father figure is dominant, even without knowing the identity of the portrayed.

If the creating of a photo album is a process complementary to the creation of a family identity, than it is a very responsible and, above all, educational task. The photo of Ženi Zidverc, my great grand mother, with her five children has been composed in a way, discreetly showing that this mother, sitting in front of a massive drapery (in the religious iconography used to show the interior of the temple, the private domain), is turned to the family and educating the children. While sitting on a chair, dressed in a traditional cloth blouse and a long, heavy skirt that is easy to wear out during the housework, Ženi holds a smiling baby that, prepared for the photo session, looks curiously to the objective. That baby is Stela, my grandmother, the youngest child in Zidverc family. Her older sisters, Dora and Frida, wearing the same, school urban costumes, that is, dresses made of traditional cloth with waists and hair ribbons, stand on their mother's left and right side, while their brothers Adolf and Maksim are in front of them, in their "uniforms". Here we must not forget that, according to the traditional iconography, the character of a woman who teaches, especially her own child, represents the general place in the European history of art – from the Virgin Mary holding a book in front of baby Christ to 19th century photos representing mother holding her son for his ear with one hand, while in the other she has the stick. Up to the last cover with the pompous bind of the oldest family album I keep, one after another, portraits are as carefully composed and selected, preserving the convenient narrative for future generations. Afterward, as the technology progressed and social frameworks differed, family photo album also changed. However, it still followed the idea of identity representation and transmission of family mementos to future generations. Along with the images of children growing up in Belgrade that is being modernized, the new concept of being a woman and their new position in the society, photos reveal that Frida, Dora and Stela have slowly left the private and entered the public domain. Following all the existent photos we could easily recognize the taste of the time, understand the interests of my grandmother and her family, but also conclude what are the dominant socio-cultural frames of Belgrade bourgeois population in the first half of the 20th century (Gnjatović 2014, 1125-1139). Family photo album is consequently, a particular carrier of memory, representing images which are selected to be remembered, but also avoiding the unwanted ones.

The last photo I have inherited where my grandmother is signed as Stella is from the year 1940. The next one, signed by the same person, but under the name Jelka is from 1950s. Where are the images of the past illustrating this gap of almost a decay, one would ask logically.

MEMORY WITHOUT THE EXTERNALIZED IMAGES OF THE PAST

“While the time is running, lightness and shadow are interchanged in our lives. Oblivion takes part in our lives equally with the remembrance. From our happiness we succeed in preserving just a superficial impression, while even the strongest shots are healed again fast.”
(Assmann A. 1994,74)

Family photo albums of my grandmother do not preserve even one photo which could suggest the war happenings, destruction of Belgrade, hidings, running from, Holocaust or Calvary. Albums from the first half of the 20th century could not still stand these visual representations, nor was the priority to take these kinds of images under the hard circumstances at the time. Therefore, photo albums show the nice layers of the identity which are shaped by their owner and preserved for the future generations who will, like me, search for the justification for their existence in current age and spot. Neither my grandmother, nor her photo albums were capable of presenting terrible images of the dark period of her life. All the photos, documents and letters from that period, she has deliberately burnt and destroyed after the War. Little information about this period I manipulate with today, I have found during the research of the documents in the Jewish historical museum in Belgrade and through many conversations with few who survived Holocaust in Serbia and three successors of Zidverc family who kept fragments of memory and tried to arrange them in a senseful image as I do now.

On the 19th of October 1941, Stela Zidverc married in one small village to Evgenije Kostić, an engineer from Southern Serbia. Her sister, Frida was hidden there by grandpas' friends, miners. Stela has written, already then, in a wedding book her new name, Jelka and has taken the surname Kostić from Evgenije. She has also changed her public religion when marrying the Orthodox husband in order to survive the War. Consequently, due to the social circumstances, she has literally changed her identity and became Jelka Kostić whom I have known as my grandmother. My grandmother, I will conclude afterwards, lived one half of her life with the completely different name and religion then the ones I knew for. Her brother, Adolf has

escaped to United States of America through Italy and it was unknown for years what had happened to him, while the other brother, Maksim died in Jasenovac camp in 1942. All these data I have never heard from my grandmother but, through the research of the existing images of the past around, I have tried to fulfill the holes in the memory on her life and find the nonexistent images, the ones left to oblivion.

Fridrich Nietzsche argues that, in order to survive a history, a dose of oblivion is necessary (Niče 1979). Still, if a photo album is a socially constructed space of someone's memory in which the selection of the content creating remembrance is equally important as the rejection of some past images in order to construct identity convenient to the surrounding, is the total forgetting the right term to use, or some data are actually just covered, hidden from the others, but still living/existing as 'raw material' in personal memories?

Writing about forgiving and forgetting, Avishai Margalit asks a question if forgetting can be deliberate? What this author notices is that forgetting cannot be voluntary. It is not a coherent term, but more the conscious act, a decision and politics of behavior. If we compare this socially constructed forgetting to the total oblivion, or biological amnesia, we would conclude that amnesia definitely changes the identity of a person who after forgetting every aspect of its life has just a base which needs fields of interaction in order to develop itself and survive. The identity of this person is undoubtedly changed as it does not remember any of the images from the past (Margalit 2015, 151-167). On the other hand, if hiding, suppressing and avoiding to represent to the others some traumatic memories for example, even if we never mention them, these memories influence our identity and they still exist in ourselves.

CAFTANISM INSTEAD OF FORGETTING

In memory studies, as we could see, there is often use of terms forgetting and oblivion. However, the research of my grandmothers' identity construction has led me to conclusion that these two are maybe too wide and not completely defined terms. If the process of remembering and selecting contents of the past which will be represented to others and transmitted to future generations is socially determined, then, the process of forgetting as the other constitutive element of memory, is also influenced by relevant cultural and ideological frames, a socially constructed oblivion, not the literal one. When it comes to the collective memory, Aleida Assmann pointed out how important it is on a collective level (for the victims) to jointly preserve the tragic past in order to overcome that trauma

(Assmann 2011, 128-134). She also develops further, complex research on different forms of forgetting: automatic, delayed, selective forgetting, the one that punishes, the repressive, defensive and complicit forgetting for the sake of witness protection, as well as the constructive forgetting in the service of a new political or biographical beginning and therapeutic forgetting, i.e. shedding the burden of the past. Analyzing the constructive and the therapeutic forgetting she recognizes the positive aspects of them, a perspective which enables the future (Asman, 2018), an effect that is also important for this discussion primarily in the context of individual memory.

Some theoreticians however, use as well the term *covered memories* when referring to the traumatic experiences people want to suppress. This *covering* of some parts of ones' identity I will try to explain through the metaphor of caftan and to suggest the term *caftanism* as a counterpart, an opposite to previously defined *remembrance*. The metaphor of the caftan, however, helps me explain my grandmothers' creation of photo albums which represents some segments of the past, but also avoids the 'ugly' and 'unwanted' images of the war, calvary, dark and hard periods of her life.

Actually, the term *caftanism* is on one hand linked to the Jewish secession in Austro-Hungary and to the Gottfried Semper's *Bekleidungs-theorie* in the architectural domain, on the other. The word *caftan* has its origins in Persia and denotes a robe with long sleeves. Living as minority groups in European cities, Jews were persecuted or converted, and public expression of their opinion and habits was suppressed many times. Building the edifices which embed into the rest of the city, Jews made interiors of their synagogues and homes behind the facade. The great difference between interiors from the outer "curtains" that melt with the surroundings couldn't be even assumed. Even when Christianized, Jewish people have sometimes been hiding in their homes to practice religious rituals. "The surface, often abstracted from the building's bearing structure, becomes a *book* onto which external (non-architectural, often textual) content is applied: the brick or stone structure is clad with shiny ceramics decorated with a repetitive pattern or calligraphy. With that, architecture automatically de-signifies itself: the surface, detached from architecture's internal contents (structure, static, etc.), becomes a textual attachment conveying sacred script or neutral geometrical decoration." (Klein 2006, 7) Writing about the similar problem, the impossibility to build noticeable and prominent Jewish synagogues, especially in Poland between 16th and 18th century, Gottfried Semper uses the term

Bekleidung, a German word for clothing, in this sense hiding the edifices and everything that might be happening in them under different facade (Klein 2008, 116). The interesting fact is that many Jewish people, although baptized (probably in order to be accepted by the community in which they lived, and to survive), have still continued practicing their initial religious rituals in shadowy corners of their private houses. Therefore, after one lecture and my further conversation to professor Klein on this topic, we agreed upon the thought he inspired me on to, that is, in this context, *caftanism* as a concept can be widen from architectural domain to all the other aspects of the Jewish being, as well as to other similar minority groups' behavior.⁹ Using the metaphor of caftan we can explain more clearly the activity of covering some segments of the identity from the others, while these images of the past still exist in our (inner) memory.

Being somewhere minority or not, it seems as we create ourselves robes under which we hide particles of our identity, covering everything that our social surrounding would not accept or what we do not like representing to the group we belong to. This is how I observe also the photo album of my grandmother as a facade in which, once Stela Zidverc from Ashkenazi family living in Belgrade, and to me known as Jelka Kostić who somehow survived the War, a literature professor from Belgrade, needed to select some of her memories while covering simultaneously under the caftan many painful and traumatic experiences which also still constituted her personality. Changing her identity for others, or better: changing the perception of her identity, literally by changing the name and religion on the paper, Stella still remained the same person with all the discourses of the past which constructed her individual identity.

What I knew, and what she told us, is that she has deliberately burnt many documents, letters and some photos from the War period. She told us as well that she was still afraid. What I am sure about as well is that she did not forget, but kept everything in her memories. She just never

⁹ After meeting professor Klein at the 5th Workshop on Jewish Art and Tradition at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, and after listening to his lecture in the field of the history of architecture, we discussed further on the concept of Caftanism which he offered. We agreed upon the idea that this term could be used not just in the architectural domain but in the domain of memory studies as well. Still, considering the fact that professor Klein explained the architecture of synagogues through the metaphor of caftan, I found convenient to use this term particularly when reading the photo album and memories of Jewish family. However, the term offered could be used in wider sense as well.

wanted to speak about this, holding the caftan of her memories tight and covering deeply her pains, traumas and fears with it.

Caftanism, we could conclude, is a socially determined oblivion, the one which does not lead to amnesia, but leaves traces on the person. These traces are not the ones taken to become figures of memory, mementos which are selected to be remembered, represented to others and transmitted to future generations. However, these traces stay as the inner, deliberately hidden memories, which deeply mark the individual identity and attitude of a person. These leyers of deliberate forgetting however, even being „the invisible“ or at least less visible narratives, could eventually be taken from the limbo of oblivion and become relevant and visualised memory, as my grandmothers' heritage was important marker for my research and individual identity apprehension and construction.

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