Earth and stone

Artist Sława Harasymowicz in conversation with curator and art historian Dr Magdalena Ziółkowska. Excerpted from the public event held at Klinkerwerk at Neuengamme Memorial, 25 August 2024

Magdalena Ziółkowska: I will start with a simple question: why Neuengamme, what brings you here, how does this place connect to the entangled history in your own family, life and artistic practice?

Sława Harasymowicz: I am here because of Marian Górkiewicz, who was my maternal grandfather's youngest brother. He was a prisoner in Hamburg and died on a mined ship in the Baltic during the war. That was the narrative as I knew it, growing up. We didn't really talk about him. Marian was like a fuzzy cut out, a shadow. In my mind, 'Hamburg' became this place that's out of bounds, impossible to visit.

I moved to London in 1998 and for the next decade or so I was a relatively frequent, but a visitor to Poland. Around 2007 I went to an exhibition at a public library in Kraków, which included several pre-war snapshots of my paternal grandparents on a skiing holiday. I became obsessed with these pictures. This led to questions around my identity, genealogy. Soon I realised two things. First, that my family history is not 'separate' from the collective Polish second world war experience, as I believed. And, second, that their fates were bound up with 'familiar catastrophes' which I knew almost by heart from my school years in communist Poland, as well as other disasters, which are much less known.

My research around Marian's story started around 2014. I looked directly into archives to try to find out about his fate, and then to understand what happened in the Baltic in Neustadt Bay near Lübeck in May 1945, and how it was possible that the allies bombed two ships loaded with concentration camp prisoners. My stance was emotionally charged, not historiographic. I think I tried to carry out an investigation, I got sucked into it. In any case, at the time I couldn't find publications about Neustadt, there was basic information, but not everything was adding up.

For me, a key reference is in a cardboard folder, held in the National Archives. It contains some working notes and documents and a final report on 'investigation on Disaster at Neustadt Bay' completed in February 1946. Apart from this there was not much to go on, only fragments, clues. And different interpretations.

I want to add that tracking Marian was not just about putting together an order of events leading to his arrest and imprisonment here, and the stupid death in the Baltic. I used archives directly, because I was looking for 'direct' traces of maybe life, not death, something that can be maybe, not exactly rescued, but something that can be brought back from oblivion, rescued in a kind of different way.
Marian is a ghost, also of all this unfinished business, past injustice. The question is, how do we react, do we care? This transcends a single family history, and even perhaps one particular history, because the stuff is more universal.

I absolutely did not expect this would turn out to be such a long term labyrinthian exploration, with one door (or trapdoor?) after another, and a constant seduction. My first exhibition responding to 'Marian's story' took place in Birmingham and was meant as a 'situation report': to set up what's at stake in a series of three shows in 2015-2016. I was sure three projects would be sufficient to explore and close the issue.

MZ: You mentioned the first project in Birmingham, but there was also the show in Warsaw a few years ago, which is when we started to collaborate more closely. I met you, I think in 2017, when you participated in the exhibition 'The Trouble with Value', curated by Kris Dittel and Krzysztof Siatka, at the Bunkier Sztuki Gallery of Contemporary Art in Kraków. Your project was a story about the house at Łobzowska Street related also to the history of your family. Later, I became absolutely amazed by the history of 'The Bay', that is the sinking of the ships in Neustadt Bay, which was also the title of the show in Warsaw at the Foundation of Archaeology of Photography. You find new materials in archives all the time, because they evolve, as Neuengamme's archive, as Alexandra [Koehring] mentioned. You collect more and more, you discover more and more, so every time an archive is revisited, there is more to discover or to complete or to find out.

How do you know what to do with all of this, because there is a huge difference between the way the archivist, and the historian works, and what unfolds when you come in, with artistic tools, with artistic perception, experience. How would you describe your approach and the decisions you have made to come up with these particular works?

SH: I am not interested in 'countering' the actual past and neither am I on a mission to 'put things right'. I need to know the facts, but archives are fascinating to me exactly because they contain clues to something else, something unknown, beyond information.

My approach with 'Klinkerwerk', like the rest of my practice dealing with 'Marian' wasn't linear - it was immersive, not 'ordered'. I did not 'proceed' by first carrying out extensive archival research, to then consider the completed research, and finally draw out a streamlined conceptualised version, or the 'artwork'. Not because I never work in this way. I knew nothing at the start and everything was happening at once. My research involved institutional archives, but also the internet, conversations, image wasteland, physical, architectural, sites and material investigations. Information was coming in all the time, revisions, with no schedule. My ideas kept evolving and I made different 'working works' throughout, because I need to see how images and material behave in relation to a subject. And because the subject is elusive, I think I constantly tried to shape it into existence, through the work.

To give you an anecdote, when I was preparing the first exhibition, I still had no idea what Marian looked like. There were no photographs of him at home (I found out from the custodians at Pomorska Street Museum in Kraków that the Gestapo routinely destroyed personal, family albums of people they arrested, at the point of arrest). I tried to draw him based on my grandfather's identification photo from the occupation, and yet another brother, who was an actor. A lot of my thinking then was wrapped around the fact that Marian was invisible. And then I obtained his diaries, and in the middle there was a small photograph. I had to take a step back from that 'romantic' notion of erasure, of not knowing Marian's face. So, anyway, as this project at Neuengamme developed there were many options. But language and architecture have been constant.

I got hold of Marian's diaries from 1938 and up to his arrest in March 1941, and his letters from Neuengamme to his wife, by quite an uncanny coincidence. Without going into detail, in July 2015 I met my distant relative who I think wanted to pass the package of papers on to someone else. The first letter is from early summer 1941 ('I am in a new camp. I am settled now and can start writing to you'), and the last letter is dated December 1944. The earlier letters are written on two pages, and the latest are on tiny pieces of paper, you know, as the fate of the war changes, so everything shrinks in a way.

The letters say, hello, thank you for your letter from two weeks ago, I am well, hope you are well too. They are signals: I'm alive. Marian's handwriting looks exactly the same in the letters as in the diaries. His diaries are reflective, fluid, sometimes poetic, sometimes self-critical and funny, and it is really horrible to see the script displaced into the KZ correspondence form, and into German.

But there was an earlier breakthrough, before the diaries and the letters. In January 2015. In response to my enquiry about Marian, the Neuengamme archive sent me scans of records, but also a survivor's statement detailing prisoners' forbidden cultural activities. Such as, book 'readings' from memory, spoken academic lectures, complex mathematical tasks without pen and paper.
Also, a group of Polish prisoners regularly performed secret, spoken radio 'broadcasts'. They were popular moments of respite, but to me they were also collective resistance, against forgetting, through entertainment, through culture.[1] Their tools were, memory, language, imagination. I wondered, how did they prepare, did they rehearse? The report lists Marian as one of the core 'journalists', who was responsible for a column entitled 'literature and poetry from the concentration camp'. I was elevated, really astounded. There were thousands of people incarcerated here, and this short statement mentions Marian by name. All of a sudden, a solid thread, something about a person, something beyond 'grandfather's brother who died in Hamburg', or H.N.5 515.

As I found out later - from the diaries - Marian was a poet, he wrote a lot, he practised language. So it is extremely moving to see that he tried to maintain that connection to poetry here in Neuengamme, to hold on to a miniscule degree of agency.

MZ: Another place comes now to the story, and this is the place where we are in, klinkerwerk, or brickworks. After ongoing research, a couple of visits here, gathering materials, thinking about all that, and also processing it through your own intuitive kind of tools, you said that you really wanted to do something here in the open part of the building, which serves as a monument itself, with some historical information on the sideboards, and the plan of the site).

I think that was the point in our collaboration when we began to discuss how to respond to the site. What is very interesting also from the curatorial perspective is the question of how not to be illustrative, not to repeat the language of the historians, not to serve information, not to describe things. It would be very easy just to put a table stating who Marian was, what he was doing here, and it would exactly follow the current path also of the memory narrativity. The idea was to do something different, with a different sensitivity. To see how you were thinking, and how the project evolved in time, to be in conversation with you about that was fascinating for me.

SH: Yes, and of course we did not want to turn this space into a temporary display space, an art gallery, this project is site-responsive, so it is a different approach altogether.

Anyway, I am not interested in representing past trauma visually, to state what happened, that there were thousands of victims…I never wanted to make work 'about' concentration camps or 'memory and trauma' in this context. At the same time, my practice does not happen in a void, it connects to actual facts. These are interesting tensions. As far as I am concerned my practice is auto/biographical, and I am intrigued

[1] This information inspired the script and a spoken vocal performance Sława Harasymowicz recorded with a group of actors at the Freud Museum (*Radio Warszawa*, 2016).

as to what this can mean, beyond my own personal questions and obsessions, how 'archives' can make me see things differently, change my reactions to history. Right here my family history is similar to thousands of other families' histories. And memory interacts with architecture.
But as I said earlier, the idea of actually visiting this place was completely abstract, I didn't even consider it until a couple of years ago…

Anyway, we had some conversations about time. It is fascinating how the past, present and future clash together in this building. I should probably mention that the purpose of the factory was to produce material for radical reshaping of Hamburg to a future 'vision' conjured up by Hitler in the 1930s, and that the factory was owned by 'German Earth and Stone Works Ltd', an SS economic enterprise.
Brickworks was built as a modern factory, it was wired up, used electric powered systems throughout, but the massive structure is supported by beams of wood, not steel, because the German war industry consumed all metal. It's both 'new' and old, a modernist ruin from the outset.
Even though the entire complex is huge, because of the level of automation, there were on average only 70 or 80 prisoners working inside at any given time. There is a striking photo in the archive: the beams, underneath, an endless pit of raw mass, and just one tiny person on the edge of this mud-abyss. The isolation is palpable.

Another example of unhinged time at play is the Thielbek, the ship that Marian died on. In 1950, it was salvaged from the bottom of the Baltic and put to routine commercial use carrying cargo. It was camouflaged: it changed names a few times, and it ended in a scrapyard in the mid 1970s in Split in the former Yugoslavia. I found a colour photo also from the mid 1970s with the Thielbek anchored in the port of Grenada. What 'should' (?) remain a wreck, in the Baltic, clashes with this ordinary freighter travelling the world and smashed up to pieces in the end.

Marian's wife wrote to the Red Cross in the 1970s: I would like to receive confirmation whether my husband died on the Thielbek in 1945.

So there are facts, events which happened. That's one timeline. And then there are the timelines of waiting, uncertainty, trying to make sense of it and, you know, memory.
So there is the intuitive approach, works in progress, but also conceptual decisions. For example, from when to look? whether to look at the situation 'from' before, or after? I wanted to place my installation independently of time.

MZ: You brought this very private side of Marian to the installation, because the longest, the biggest element of the installation, which is in the windows alongside one wall, is the sentence Marian wrote in his diary, if I'm correct?

SH: Yes, and this is also in a way a sentence about time. When you walk along the wall and read it, letter by single letter, it says: I feel like having a cigarette and to daydream. I found it in his diary from July 1939. I like that he writes about wanting 'to daydream', as an activity, I think it really connects to his character, at least as far as I can decipher it from his diaries.

Anyway, the sentence can be read as sort of nice, everyday wish from 'before', written on a pre-war summer afternoon, but to me it was clear that it already contains a premonition of the future, the war, when he would be a forced labourer harnessed to this 'machine' at Neuengamme and when to 'smoke and daydream' was impossible. The sentence here is

an expression of protest, sorrow, and it is a warning, because it talks about what has been lost, and what was about to be lost. I wanted to make it very visible.

MZ: Sława, at first you wanted to have this sentence written on the roof of the brickworks, but then we realised it would be technically impossible to have this huge, gigantic paper scroll installed on the roof. So instead, we have it inside of the windows. This also activated the space, gave an order to it, because these letters and words really are like a rhythm. We can also imagine the rhythm that was at work here, during the real work of the brickworks, producing the bricks.

Everything here was about order and coordination. When we look at the floor, there are horizontal and straight lines, markers of activity, because this was a real factory that produced material.
So, this was, I think, a very interesting concept to bring free time, leisure, dreaming into the space that is modern, that is realising the modern myth of production, industry.

SH: Yes, the artwork references a personal text, a voice. Like an echo. But it is not only Marian's voice that is present. Since my first visit here in summer 2021 these windows have troubled me, because they are nailed shut, I mean they are completely covered by roughly cut horizontal wooden slats, like shutters, nailed permanently to the window frames. So, there is no view. The building is blinded. It is impossible to see out or look in. On the outside, the slats are painted red, that's like the colour of dried blood. Where the older layers crack, the paint hangs in threads. It's really unnerving. This goes along the entire brick factory complex, which is shaped like a massive E flat on the ground. We are here in one 'arm' of this 'E'. So, the idea from early on was to open the windows somehow. If not literally, then metaphorically.

Although the architecture is softened by dust, cobwebs, cracks and various marks on the walls, this is a huge post-industrial shell. The letters pretend to be part of it. The voice comes through them, as if in spite of them. They had to appear machine-made, not to mimic handwriting, so I screen printed them with paper stencils. This is a bit of a paradox because screen printing is very hands on. Each letter has its own small discrepancies, like bricks. They are printed on polymer paper, insulation material often used in building and construction industries. The air constantly pushing in through the small cracks and gaps in the windows makes the letters move. With the strong wind as today, they visibly gasp and breathe out.

I did not want to create a kind of visual tombstone for Marian, but to keep trying to activate this memory, and connection. Archival research has allowed me to establish some facts, also about my family history. But 'Marian', in the project, is a semi-invented character, a point of departure, for me, and for the audience, with different associations.

There are 51 windows, and 45 letters. The sentence is spelt out in sets of three signs, because the windows are arranged in 'triptychs', with added gaps here and there. To read it in full one needs to walk along it – which means, along the entire eastern side of this building, starting from the deepest point, furthest away from the entrance to brickworks. As you walk, you may need to step back and to think, 'okay, what does this set of signs actually add up to? I need to read it again.' Which is my intention. To lure the audience in, and to slow it all down.

FROM THE AUDIENCE: When I walked there, I misread it. 'I feel like having a cigarette, and I feel like Trauern.' Not Träumen, but Trauern. Because it's very similar. And I think that resonates so very beautifully with what you said, because you mentioned the word

activate. And I thought maybe we could even say animate, so really that the spirit of transgenerational memory goes through this space now. So, I was reading it, but I was reading the spirit.

SH: Thank you for this observation. I'm pleased you mentioned this. Because there actually is a deliberate misspelling. It was my decision not to use umlaut. Because it would be so complete, visually and linguistically perfect and correct, in German.
I thought Marian might have been writing the letters, and communicating here in broken German, definitely with a Polish accent, who knows. The sentence is of course from his diary before his arrest, but the translated language anchors him here.
And I thought it's good that there is ambiguity, because the word trauma, hinted by the German Traumen without the dots, is international, and it works itself into the sentence.

Anyway, the blocky, geometric shapes, kind of rectangles, triangles, circles, repeat in some of the works on the floor. The specific geometry connects the fact that for some time after the war this space was used by the local population to store their leisure boats. 'Day shapes' are these quite striking black geometric objects, displayed in specific arrangements to communicate between boats, for instance, their position on the water or some complications. Two circles, or circle and square, or a rectangle, or two inverted triangles, for example, all mean something. It's a code.

MZ: [responding to the audience] The letters were in German because everything was read all the time… But also, German was quite popular in Poland. Poland before the war was a multi-language country and German is a familiar language in a way to the Polish ear. During the war, everybody learned German immediately, because you had to, in order to function.

FROM THE AUDIENCE: You've included audio in the installation. We are hearing this all the time. The sound could be... water flowing?

SH: Yes, water. Sound is a spatial part of the installation, an invisible sculpture that uses layers to invoke a mechanism, which has expired, but in spite of this, is still quietly at work, because it cannot stop. There is a moment when the violin briefly comes in. And that's Marian, because he was a violin player as well as a poet. [2]

The eastern wall of the building, which includes the sentence installation, is like borderlands of memory. Behind this wall, just metres away, is the harbour basin on the branch canal dug out by the prisoners to connect to the River Elbe. And that's the edge of the camp. During the construction, as I've read in the archives, the foundations kept sinking into the ground, because of the unexpectedly high water level here. As if the building did not actually want to be built. So the motif of the water is integral to the material and architectural history of brickworks. And it also refers to what happened in Lübeck.

MZ: As we can also see in the exhibition in the main building, the sinking of Cap Arcona and the Thielbek in Neustadt Bay near Lübeck, was extremely manipulated and misrepresented historically between East and West Germany. So, it's another layer.

We were in the Eastern Bloc, Poland, I mean. So we didn't hear anything, or rather we heard a very particular story of what happened. Whereas West Germans had a different narrative about that.

[2] Audio loop is a collaboration with Ian Powell, sound designer and drummer.

SH: Not to mention the British side. That's yet another layer. As I said earlier, there was an investigation, and the report is accessible to the public (though only in person). It was completed by a British investigative team. One of several such teams operating in North West Germany. They were basically lawyers, reserve officers, and they had to establish the scope of war crimes and prepare legal cases for prosecutions. From as early as April 1945 their activities were reduced in line with the 'pragmatic' approach and new political divisions in postwar Europe. The Neustadt team was also instructed to wrap up quickly and they finished in haste.

The report is in the National Archives. It is not a top secret file (or, not anymore). There is a bulleted list of 'exhibits' used in court as evidence, long since scattered. I was especially disappointed that I could not locate exhibit number one on the list: a signal message. From whom, to whom? In any case, the report summarises that the RAF intelligence failed to pass on the information about the prisoners on the ships to the pilots. The investigators called - in 1946 - for a formal enquiry to address 'grievances' caused by the Allied attack on the ships.
The report is significant, but fascinating are also the investigators' notes on the margins, small correspondences, the debris of the enquiry. Everything is in the archive, even though it's so depleted, but everything is kind of there if you want to look and sort of put it together and draw conclusions.

MZ: What about the work on paper, in the front? You were talking about facts and information, but also then you have the aspect of the visual, because art is always about visual translation, about how to translate words into the picture.

In Poland, for instance, we have this tradition, involving paper cuts, with scissors. They are always double-sided, very symmetrical. And this work reminds me also of that symmetry.

SH: I walked around Neuengamme quite a lot and noticed the embroidered curtains in windows in some of the older houses in the area. I looked into the locality, folk culture, farming traditions in Neuengamme and the Vierlande region. Vierlande patterns are dense, very detailed. The embroidery is cross stitch, raster-like, and often uncanny, with strange things piling up that you can see when you look closely. I made drawings and monotypes from some extreme 'close ups' and there was something in this particular fragment which resonated. It made me think of something crude and proficient.
The middle section of the factory complex is where the clay for making bricks was brought in from the pits outside. It was pulled up in trolleys and thrown from above into this mountain of mud. So, the intention for that long silver tongue, I mean the artwork, is that it's coming directly into the building, and from within it.

FROM THE AUDIENCE: I think it's very beautiful. I am sorry to say it. I think when you put this on top of your house in Vierlande and you are a farmer, then it's really saying I'm rich, I have ornaments, I have documentation of my heritage. And it's like the crown of the house. So this is like celebrating having a home, having roots, being at home, and so on. And this is really very emotional, responding to this building, to this site, in this way.

FROM THE AUDIENCE [ALEXANDRA KOEHRING]: I wanted to come back to this moment of beauty. Because this is a phenomenon that we, of course, encounter here every day. So that, of course, there are so many moments of beauty.
Because we have the landscape, we have the light. And also, this building has an atmosphere. It's amazing, yes. So it's an impressive building. There's light coming in. And

I think it's very difficult to stand up to the atmosphere of this building and the atmosphere of the site.
And I really think you found a very sensitive way, because you don't break here into this atmosphere with kind of horror. That's what you said. Your starting point is life.

Who was Marian as a living person? That you bring a living person here. And so that you discover traces or ways to the past or to the person, to his personality, how he was, his dreams, wishes, and so on, in a very sensitive way. So you are really slowly coming to the horror.

FROM THE AUDIENCE: That's really also another question. You cannot say, okay, this was a concentration camp, no beauty existed, we don't know. If you calculate it out from the very beginning, you're maybe also calculating something human out of it, I don't know.

SH: In this sense, the beauty is maybe also in that desire to maintain memory, connection to culture, when they were creating spoken radio broadcasts, reciting literature, and so on. But we absolutely must understand that the radio performances were done by a minority, 'privileged' prisoners chosen for deployment in a munitions work group, because of their agility and perception, which meant they were not totally disposable, like everyone else. They were not the norm, and they do not represent what this place was about.
But what you've said about the building is very true. I mean, the building is beautiful. It's contemplative, like a cathedral. It's impressive. The way the light works. But it also brings some risk to the project, that the project will become picturesque.

MZ: As for instance, often happens with site-specific projects, Biennale, etc., artists presenting works in abandoned buildings, etc., ruins. We, curators say, whatever you put there, it will be amazing. And that's another angle of the situation.

Once you want to correspond with the history of the site, then you don't want to bomb it with your artwork. But then also you don't want to disappear there, or be taken as too beautiful, too aesthetic. And I think to find a kind of balance is very difficult.

And it's not us who would judge if this has happened here, but at least I think we have very much worked on that, taking into consideration all of these critical issues.

SH: Absolutely. Today we are in a readymade, archival stage set. Some of the 'traces' strewn around are more recent than we might think. I was actually wary of using that 'old' chair in the table installation, precisely because it looks too authentic, like a dusty memory art trope. Also, this was a factory, the place of war production and other activity. After the war klinkerwerk was leased by a Swedish manufacturer of light concrete, and production continued until 1973. Then yachts were stored and repaired here. And in the late 1980s tents were put up with Roma and Sinti people living here, finding shelter in klinkerwerk. And through all that, this site was constantly accruing different remnants.
It's really a storehouse, a magazine of discards, especially in the parts of the building normally closed to the public: from a deconstructed village house neatly arranged in stacks, broken office furniture, semi-formed lumps of concrete, dusty clay ornaments from a church to old bathtubs and so on.
So I was wary. Also of that chair. But, you know, I thought, maybe we can do it. The chair looks perfect. But it may be from another 'magazine'.