Grandmother Memories for the Future. Solidaric Practices and (Slow) Memory in Contemporary Oppositional Struggles in Poland

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This article is about the relation between (slow) memory and solidaric practices through the lens of a Warsaw-based activist group called *Polskie Babcie* (Polish Grandmothers). Driven by concerns for their grandchildren's future, these grandmothers leaned heavily on memories as they manifested their support for the rule of law, the environment, LGBTQ+ rights, and more, during the rule of the national-conservative party Law and Justice (PiS). Commemoration was rarely the purpose of their actions; rather, memory existed as a repertoire of songs, skills and experiences which were continuously revisited and recycled in public action. Dramatic memories from Solidarity in the 1980s coexisted on this repertoire with less eventful experiences of mutual care, friendship and of "getting by" under tough circumstances. Having traced the steps and stories of these grandmothers through interviews and observations, I dedicate this text to the emplaced and embodied nature and creative usage of memories, fresh and old, simple and grand, in contemporary oppositional struggles in Poland. I also engage with theoretical discussions on the significance of memories which are not aimed at commemoration or monumentalization, but which 'stick around', nonetheless, slowly and inconspicuously, through human practice and interaction.

Keywords: slow memory, Poland, grandmothers, LGBTQ+ rights, solidarity

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In the heart of Warsaw there is a roundabout called *Rondo de Gaulle'a*, and in the middle of this roundabout there is a plastic palm tree which has served as a backdrop for many political protests over the years. Anyone who passed by this iconic palm

tree[1] on a Thursday around 4.30 p.m., between 2019 and 2023, would notice a small but colorful gathering consisting of around 15-30 participants from the association *Polskie Babcie* – the Polish Grandmothers. Armed with political banners and pins, the grandmothers met here weekly to sing and chant out their resistance to the ruling party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice, PiS). An EU-critical and national-conservative party, PiS had initiated its comeback to parliamentary power in 2015, after 8 years in opposition, by tampering with the system of checks and balances, taking over state owned media, tightening (already very restrictive) abortion laws, and attacking minority groups.[2] The manifestations of the grandmothers grew out of the ties that were bound between a handful of pensioners, mostly women, who kept running into each other in 2015–2016, while participating in large-scale protests against the first antidemocratic strikes of PiS. Spending long hours on their feet outside the parliament, the courts and the headquarters of the public television, the grandmothers started chatting with each other, and as hours turned to months and years, they became friends in the struggle. Looking back at their time 'on the street', they recalled how massive and joyous the protests were initially, before internal conflicts and political fatigue had thinned the ranks of the opposition.[3] When asked about what kept them going, they pointed to their mutual friendship, as well as to their memories of communist rule and its dismantlement, to which many of them had contributed as members of *Solidarność*;[4] a formative experience which had imbued them with a 'biographical preparedness to act' (Struzik, 2019: 128). From their narratives, it was obvious that the grandmothers had made themselves at home in post-1989 Poland; they cherished its constitution, institutions, and possibilities. Not identifying with the proverbial losers of the transformation (Nowicka-Franczak, 2018), they were out on the streets in defense of freedoms once gained, which they sought to preserve for future generations. Iwonna, who was the head of *Polskie Babcie*

1 The palm tree was erected in 2002, as a part of a public art project by Joanna Rajkowska, titled *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue.* The title alludes to the name and history of the artery – Aleje Jerozolimskie – that cuts through *Rondo de Gaulle'a* and to the 'the void left by the absence of the Jewish community in Poland' (Rajkowska n.d.).

2 PiS was founded in 2001 by the twin brothers Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczyński, with a background in the Solidarity movement and in the conservative groups that formed after 1989 when the movement split into right-wing and liberal political spheres. During their first session in power, as the main force in a coalition government between 2005–2007, PiS strove to implement their vision of a 'Fourth Republic' which, in contrast with the post-communist Third Polish Republic, would sweep out the remnants of communist rule in Poland and preserve the country's national sovereignty and distinctiveness in the face of destructive influences from the West. Under the banner of a solidaric Poland, PiS turned social transfers into a key issue during their years in opposition, in 2007–2015, in combination with a radicalized, illiberal agenda, which gained momentum when the party won governmental majority in 2015. For an excellent overview of the underpinnings and consequences of the 'cultural wars' initiated by PiS, see Slačálek (2021). See also Bernhard (2021) and Bodnar (2021) for more on the political situation in Poland during 2015–2023.

3 For more on the civic resistance to PiS, see Karolewski (2016), Bodnar (2021), and Krajewski (2023).

4 *Solidarność* is the Polish name of the independent trade union and oppositional movement Solidarity which took form in 1980 and contributed to the downfall of communist rule in Poland.

when I did fieldwork among them, captured her return to oppositional activity with these words (interview 9 November 2022):

> *And then when communism fell, then I was so happy, I thought, this is the end, there will never be such a situation again, where I have to be involved* (laughs) *in any kind of protest activity, so I was a business woman, high heels, and those suits, right* (...) *But then came PIS and it turned out that you have to jump out of the high heels and put on pants, and only buy 'demonstratki'* (sporty shoes, fit for demonstrations).

Iwonna's *demonstratki* can serve as an entry into this text, which explores the various supports (Butler, 2015) – shoes, squares, stories – that enable and animate the activities of the grandmothers. Writing from within the field of memory studies, my particular focus is on the bearing of memories on their ideas and practices. As I will show in this text, memories are rarely used by the grandmothers for the sake of commemoration; instead, their ongoing remembrance co-exists in a rather unruly manner with other practices and temporalities, as embodied traces of the past and as fuel for oppositional action. Trigg (2012, xvii) writes that at 'no point does a linear gateway open to which memory's attributes can be laid out for detached scrutiny'. The playful and practical, messy and non-linear ways in which remembrance *goes on* (Adjam, 2017) between the grandmothers, can serve as an illustration of his phenomenological understanding of memory**,** which has influenced this text. At the same time, if I was to pick a trait of the grandmothers' mnemonic practices 'detached scrutiny' (Trigg, 2012: xvii), I would single out the ways in which they remember the bonds that tie them together. Indeed, if 'the processes of remembering are braided within the experience of close relationships', as Keightley & Pickering insist (2017: 69), then the grandmothers have a deep well to remember from. Together with close relations, the cityscape provides a solid foundation for their ongoing recollection (Casey, 2004; Connerton, 2009), and the countless interactions that take place there with sympathizers as well as adversaries.

Gearing my attention towards relational (Ricœur, 2004; Till, 2012; Keightley, Pickering, 2017), embodied (Connerton, 1989) and non-commemorative (Schudson, 1997) ways of remembering brings me close to the concept of *slow memory* (Wüstenberg, 2023), which deals with the afterlives of uneventful pasts and drawn-out developments that do not easily lend themselves to grand representation. While the ways of the grandmothers are rarely slow, the notion of *slow memory* is still useful when I take stock of their daily mnemonic activities and ask about how these inform their solidaric and oppositional practices. This question resonates with recent efforts among memory scholars to highlight positive forms of remembrance, in a field which has, thus far, been preoccupied with the afterlives of catastrophic and traumatic events. Without downplaying the significance of difficult pasts, scholars like Ann Rigney (2018, 2021; see also Katriel, Reading, *Eds.*, 2015) point to their meaningful co-existence with positive memories, which provide material for hope and social mobilization.

Polskie Babcie belong to a loose network of oppositional groups in Poland, often referred to as *opozycja uliczna* (street opposition), which mushroomed in Polish cityscapes during the rule of PiS, from 2015–2023 (Karolewski, 2016; Bodnar, 2021). While most of its members are female pensioners, younger people can occasionally be found among them, and older men form a substantial minority within the group. During fieldwork, I was told about a reluctance regarding the name of the group when it formalized in 2020, among some of its 'grandfathers'. With time, the men grew accustomed to the name, which had proven to be useful due to the unanimously positive connotations that the notion of grandmothers evokes in Polish society. While stressing the social (*społeczny*) character of their group, which lacked formal ties to party politics and included moderately conservative as well as leftist stances, most of the grandmothers I talked to were vocal supporters of the major oppositional force during PiS – *Koalicja Obywatelska* (The Citizen's Coalition, KO), with roots in the liberal-conservative party *Platforma Obywatelska* (Civic Platform, PO) and headed by former prime minister Donald Tusk. In that way, one of the main missions of the grandmothers – to push PiS away from power – was accomplished in October 2023, when KO and its allies won the parliamentary elections. In the winter of 2023, the grandmothers discontinued their weekly manifestations, but they kept returning to the streets of Warsaw frequently to voice their views on various critical issues, including reproductive rights and the upcoming Polish presidential elections in 2025.

This article draws on an ethnographic study of the practices and narratives of *Polskie Babcie*, conducted at five different occasions between November 2022 and December 2023, and consisting of observations of their manifestations and social gatherings as well as of group interviews with their core members; their preferred way of being interviewed. In what follows, the grandmothers will mostly be presented in plural, which makes them appear more unified than they were. This is motivated by the focus of this text on the memories and ideals that bring them together in action, and on the mnemonic supports and aftereffects of these actions. The text is structured thematically, after the major themes that were addressed and repeated in the narratives and practices of the grandmothers.

The power of the powerless

Rainbow-colored around its edges, the official banner of *Polskie Babcie* conveys their support for LGBTQ+ groups and, at a more general level, their desire to be visible and attract young people. The text in the middle of their banner says '*Polskie Babcie*. The power of the powerless', echoing Václav Havel's (Havel, Keane, *Eds.*, 2010 [1985]) thinking on the power that stems from 'living in truth' and not succumbing to repressive circumstances. Emphasizing the social and small-scale character of their actions, which were modest in size but made it possible for them to look themselves 'in the mirror', knowing that they 'did what they could', the grandmothers drew on

the heritage of Havel and other Eastern and Central European dissidents. At the same time, they were puzzled by the widespread political indifference which they found among compatriots, and they repeatedly discussed its root causes. Perhaps people were too scared of the state apparatus and the police to take action, and probably they were too immersed in an individualistic, consumerist culture to care enough about the lot of their land? The point about consumerism was highlighted whenever I joined the grandmothers' long walks around Warsaw, which followed the Thursday manifestations by the roundabout. Often, those walks ended up in the commercial heart of the Warsaw, by the flashy shopping mall *Złote Tarasy* (the Golden Terraces) where some of the shoppers would shield themselves from the challenging agendas of *Polskie Babcie*. This, in turn, stirred anti-consumerist comments from the grandmothers, who whispered in my ear that it was hard to understand those people with their shopping bags and take-away coffee cups and elevated material aspirations. Iwonna returned to this issue many times, comparing her own material situation, back in the days when she bought her apartment, to that of her children and their generation.

> *So, when I finally managed to get* (dochrapałam się) *that apartment, then I had linoleum* [floors]. *I didn't have a kitchen, I didn't have anything. I had those two boxes, folded armchairs and I remember some kind of table on crooked legs and I was very happy. But unfortunately, our kids, they have maxed out mortgages, so they have to have a beautiful apartment immediately, a garage, in the garage a car, a good cell phone, some kind of consumerist craziness. Of course, I think this is partly our own fault, because everything communism took from us, we wanted to give back to our kids, right away* (interview 9 November 2022).

Touching upon this 'consumerist craziness', Iwonna sometimes used the colloquial term *bieżączka*, which is a combination of the expression *sprawy bieżące* (current affairs) with the added-on ending *ączka*, that brings to mind the Polish word for fever: *gorączka*. On top of this, the word *bieżączka* shares its beginning with *biegunka*, which means diarrhea in Polish. From her referral to the *bieżączka* that characterizes contemporary society, I gathered that Iwonna saw people around her as stuck in the fast and feverish business of running their own lives, which lacked the kind of grounding in time and sturdy values that the grandmothers preached. This situation compelled her and the other grandmothers to wear pins on their clothes with the imperative 'Don't be indifferent'[5] and to keep returning to the dragon's den, aka *Złote Tarasy*, to shake up the world of the shoppers with their demanding presence.

If indifference among compatriots was sourly experienced by the grandmothers, then outright mockery and slander brought out their laughter. *Komuchy* (communist

5 This formulation was borrowed from Holocaust survivor and author Marian Turski's speech at the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in 2020.

Photo 1: Polskie Babcie with their official banner. Author: Agnes Malmgren

bastards), was a widespread offense from people passing by their manifestations, which reflected the view of PiS that liberal forces belonged to the same anti-Polish category as former communist leaders (Nijakowski, 2008). Go to church, or go home and make *pierogi* (dumplings), were common suggestions from outraged onlookers, revealing their gendered expectations on grandmothers. None of these offenses were passively accepted by the grandmothers, who did not shy away from hard words themselves, whether as a reaction to hostile onlookers or as self-initiated chants to 'f**k off' PiS, Putin or the Catholic priesthood. The grandmothers explained that they had grown accustomed to using harsher language under the influence of the massive Women's Strikes for reproductive rights, which were initiated in 2016 as a reaction to a proposed ban on abortion.[6] While protesting the ban together with younger generations of women, they realized that there was a 'war' going on in Poland, as Przemek, one of the grandfathers of the group, explained it (interview 2 December 2023). The grandmothers' sense of participating in warfare was also evident from their firm body language and daring attitudes towards the police during manifestations, from whom they experienced forceful treatment on different occasions, particularly during counter manifestations against nationalist marches which were endorsed by the governing party. Touching upon their interactions with the police, they asserted their own fearlessness, rooted in '7 years on the street' but also, for some of them, in the experience of communist times which were 'a bit more scary', as Iwonna put it (interview 9 November 2022). This defiant attitude also shone through when the grandmothers laughingly exchanged stories about playing hide and seek with the police, like when they snuck behind some trees in Kraków to pee, after a protest. Anecdotes about mocking law enforcement were equally popular, such as the one about bringing brushwood to the parliament and stating it was a 'national resourse' (*dobro narodowe*) to the officer questioning their action, which

6 For more on these protests, see Graff and Korolczuk (2022).

Photo 2: The grandmothers on their weekly walk through Warsaw. Author: Agnes Malmgren

was prompted by politicians having asked citizens to handle spiraling energy costs by supplying themselves with fuel from the forest (Dobrosz-Oracz, Walenciak, 2022).

Solidarities of the shaken

While some passers-by wanted to send the grandmothers to church, others expressed their sympathy and support, with silent nods and smiles and raised thumbs, or through singing and chanting along for a while. Spontaneous gifts from strangers walking by – cookies, chocolate, flowers – were another common feature of their Thursday walks around Warsaw. During my first interview with the grandmothers, in November 2022, they told me that people seemed to have become more supportive of their actions following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, as if moved by solidarity and by the realization of how fragile their own comfortable existence was. Later, two members of the group travelled to Ukraine to deliver food and supplies. Bringing the *Polskie Babcie* banner with them, they unfolded and took a picture of it by the Ukrainian border, to document their solidarity with the neighboring country. Przemek, who initiated this journey, told me that he was driven now by the same

'sense of duty and necessity' (*poczucie obowiązku i powinności*), as during the 1980s, when he was involved in the underground resistance. But, he conceded, concerns for the safety of Poland, and for his children and grandchildren, were also a motivating factor, as he feared a Russian invasion in his own country, if Ukraine would be lost to Putin. Przemek's sentiments were vocally expressed during the weekly manifestations of *Polskie Babcie*, when Iwonna turned on the protest song 'Russkiy idi nakhuy' (Russians go f**k yourselves) on her megaphone, and he got the chance to sing and dance out his rage against the war.

During each of my walk-alongs with *Polskie Babcie*, I witnessed how they were approached by groups of young people. Climate activists came up to thank them for their recent participation in a manifestation. Putin-critical songs brought forward youth from Ukraine who requested selfies with the grandmothers. Rainbow-colored banners stating that 'love is love' inspired applauds and air kisses from LGBTQ+ identified youth. Some of those young people even asked for a hug; an appeal that was met with pleasure by the grandmothers, who were aware of the 'rejection' that the hugged ones might be facing from their own grandparents, given the hard grip of state-sponsored queerophobia in Polish society (Struzik, 2019).[7] Aside from the personal significance of those hugs for the huggers, and for the hugged ones, I would stress their meaning as a public performance of a care practice, which is normally associated with close relations in private spheres.[8]

Following the grandmothers around Warsaw gave me an opportunity to reflect upon the relation between solidaric practices and slow memory. If solidarity is about the capacity to 'see oneself in others' (Liedman, 1999),[9] and to act on this seeing, to assert human interdependence in the face of social disintegration and inequality (Scholz, 2008) – then solidarity is constituted, in part at least, by acts which might come across as small and simple, like those hugs on the streets of Warsaw. And if longevity is a 'crucial aspect of solidarity practices' as Çagatay, Liinason & Sasunkevich hold (2022: 182), then the time spent on such acts, repeatedly, matters for their persistence and solidity. There is a case to make, then, for slow memory both fueling and flowing out of the solidarities stretched out by the grandmothers towards other struggling groups, and towards future generations. But if perseverance is a key

7 When *Polskie Babcie* painted their banners in the colors of the rainbow and became regulars at Pride parades, they were in good company with other groups who expressed solidarity with LGBTQ+ communities around this time. One telling example of this were the 70 women with a background in Solidarność who issued a support manifest in which they referenced their own memories of struggling for human dignity and freedom in the 1980s (OKO.press, 2020). In general, the logo and legacy of the solidarity movement was used by many oppositional groups under PiS, indicating not only its symbolic value but also the acute meaning of solidarity as a way of acting and being under repressive conditions (Struzik, 2019).

8 For more on the dimension of care in recent waives of protest in Poland, see Kowalska and Nawojski (2022).

9 I take this formulation from the title of Sven-Eric Liedman's book on the idea of solidarity. Liedman, in turn, borrowed it from a poem by Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf.

Photo 3: A traditional group picture under the palm tree in the roundabout of Rondo de Gaulle'a in Warsaw. Author: Agnes Malmgren

element of their solidaric practices, so is the sense of urgency and precarity (Butler, 2015) which prompted them in the first place. Indeed, the solidarities of the grandmothers are of the 'shaken' kind which Jan Patočka (1996) has written about, meaning that they come about under conditions of 'existential upheaval and disorientation' (Hagedorn, 2015: 89), when all there is left to do for people is to turn to one another. While solidarities of the shaken (Patočka, 1996) are ephemeral rather than solid (Hagedorn, 2015), they make sturdy and meaningful memories, as the case of the grandmothers show. I believe that their meaningfulness comes, in part, from the act of extending the care and consideration that goes into them, whereby distress or disintegration is replaced by a sense of connection, if only temporarily. And it also comes from the colorful recollection – of smiles and hugs and mutual caring – that these stretchy acts of solidarity feed, and the lasting 'experience of sociability' (Sennett, 2012: 53) that is fostered through this.

Spaces of appearance and their supports

The Thursdays by *Rondo de Gaulle'a* were not the only forms of public assemblages in which the grandmothers took part. Whenever I met them, they were planning to take in one manifestation or another, to express solidarity with 'unbdendable' judges[10] or support friends who were charged with any of the numerous minor offenses, such

10 For more on judges refusing to accept PiS' disregard for the rule of law, see Bodnar (2021).

as the uses of 'vulgar' language, which were vigorously traced by law enforcement. Every month on the 10th the grandmothers faithfully joined a protest organized by the group *Lotna Brygada Opozycji* (The Flying Brigade of the Opposition, LBO), which targeted the commemorations of the Smolensk disaster on the 10th of April 2010, when an airplane with President Lech Kaczyński and 95 other people, had crashed outside of Smolensk in Russia, killing everyone onboard. Significantly, the president and his company, consisting of members of the Polish cultural and political elite, were on their way to a memorial for the victims of the Katyn massacre of 1940, when most of the Polish officer corps had been killed by the Soviet NKVD. Not long after the Smolensk disaster, politicians from PiS began portraying it as a deliberate act, carried out by Russia in tandem with Polish liberals (Sztajdel, 2019). The commemorations by the *Monument to the Victims of the Smolensk Tragedy in 2010*, served as a public performance through which Jarosław Kaczyński, twin brother of Lech Kaczyński and head of PiS, kept these false and divisive (Sztajdel, 2019) allegations alive. Next to the costs and inconveniences of this monthly operation, which shut down parts of central Warsaw, the dissent against it was rooted in its focus on the dead president and oblivion of the other deceased persons, as well as in the destructive politization of a national tragedy. Among LBO activists there was also a belief that Jarosław Kaczyński might be implicated in the disaster, due to a phone conversation between him and his brother shortly before the crash, whose content had never been released to the Polish public. The suspicion was that pressure might have been put on the pilots to prepare for landing, despite the poor weather conditions in Smolensk that morning. Addressing the remaining unknowns of the disaster, bold questions were shouted out by activists during the protests, such as: 'did you pressure your brother to land?' (*kazałeś bratu lądować?*) and 'are you haunted by your conscience?' (*czy gryzie Cię sumienie?*).

The first time I joined the grandmothers for an LBO protest, which took place in *Ogród Saski*, a park some hundred meters from the Smolensk monument, I stood close to its inner circle, which was heavily guarded by the police. From there, I noticed Iwonna steeling herself when she approached the circle, as if preparing her body for the physical encounters that awaited inside of it. Having already learned from the grandmothers about the violent ways of the police during these events, which included the pulling and pushing of protesters, I was still not prepared for the turmoil that ensued shortly before Kaczyński appeared by the monument, when the police stifled the protest by violently confiscating LBO's megaphone.[11] Once it was over, Iwonna stoically concluded that this was the normal order of things. Next time I joined the grandmothers for this event, six months later, Iwonna and her closest allies had decided not to expose their bodies to the treatment of the police. Instead,

11 The actions of the police during these events have been documented by the oppositional media outlet OKO.press. See for instance Boczek (2022).

they stood by the entrance of *Ogród Saski* with a banner reading 'Closed due to the fault of Kaczyński' (*Zamknięte z winy Kaczyńskiego*). Most of the people around seemed to approve of this message, telling the grandmothers how they, too, were inconvenienced by the shutdown of central Warsaw. But a few of the passers-by stressed Kaczyński's right to mourn his twin brother, even if this came at the cost of the commuters. Would the grandmothers not mourn a close family member who had died in a tragic accident?, a lady asked. To this, they replied that they saw no mourning in the ceremony, only a political calculation which overshadowed the memories of the other deceased and interfered with the daily needs of the capital's inhabitants. As I see it, the grandmothers' protest went beyond Kaczyński's ceremony, in how it opened up a space for reflection around the role and forms of remembrance in public, with the grandmothers taking a stand for what we might label as *slow memory* (Wüstenberg, 2023), which is not concentrated to particular days, persons or places, and does not interfere with the flow of city life.

If the monthly protests run by LBO were characterized by rebellion against the main forces in Polish political life, then the tone was radically different during the *Literiada* which was held outside the presidential palace every Sunday, rain or shine. A combination of the word *litera* (letter) and the ending *iada* which, in this instance, denoted a festive event (compare with Olimp*iada*, meaning the Olympic Games), the expression *Literiada* referred to the letters KONSTYTUCJA (the Constitution) which were written on separate pieces of cardboard and held up by the participants of the event. During this manifestation, the preamble of the Polish constitution was aired via loudspeakers, followed by patriotic songs and calls to respect the letter of the law, human rights and other gains of 1989. For Ania, who emphasized that she was not a Catholic, the *Literiada* functioned as a 'sermon' to the point that she felt 'sick' the few times she missed it (interview 9 May 2023). Always carrying the constitution with her and immediately offering me a copy when we first met, together with a bracelet reading KONSTYTUCJA, Ania was the legalist among the grandmothers, with a background as a clerk at the National Bank of Poland, and as a lay judge at a court. Never a member of the Solidarity movement, unlike many of the other grandmothers, she rooted her actions in a life-long conviction that legal procedures must be respected, and she saw the constitution of 1997[12] as a non-negotiable foundation of Polish democracy.

In May 2023, I met *Polskie Babcie* when they were preparing for a massive manifestation, initiated by former prime minister Donald Tusk from liberal KO, and aimed at mobilizing popular support before the parliamentary elections the same fall. Gathering most of the oppositional groups in Poland, the manifestation was planned for noon on the 4th of June, a symbolic date and time that marked the beginning of

12 This is the constitution of postsocialist Poland. As Bodnar (2021) notes, PiS' unlawful interference with the constitution gave rise to a sense of 'constitutional patriotism' among those who rose to its defense.

the semi-free elections in 1989 which eventually led to the dismantlement of the People's Republic of Poland. When I joined the grandmothers for one of their Thursday gatherings and walks around Warsaw that May, they were inviting everyone around to participate on the 4th of June. Each of these interactions ended with the grandmothers saying *jesień nasza* (the fall is ours), in reference both to the upcoming elections, and to the expression *zima wasza, wiosna nasza* (the winter is yours, the spring is ours). This expression was coined during the cold winter of 1981, after the Communist regime had enforced Martial Law and the opposition, whose members had had either been incarcerated or gone underground, was tying its hopes to spring times ahead (Paczkowski, 2003).

Rigney writes (2021: 301) that 'the mnemonic extension of the present back into earlier fights and other generations is an active strategy for enhancing a movement's sense of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment'. Drawing on Ricœur (1999: 10), this allows for remembrance to serve as 'an imperative directed towards the future'. The act of grounding action in past experiences, and using these experiences as a guiding star, was at play when oppositional forces took to the street on the 4th of June 2023, in a manifestation which, according to the organizers, counted to half a million participants (Pawłowska, Korzeniowska, Uhlig, 2023). Mnemonically, then, this massive mobilization was carried forward by symbolic slogans and dates and by the major, collective experience of having overcome unfreedom, once before. At the same time, it seems reasonable to claim that the gravity and unity which came about at that crucial moment was nurtured by ongoing practices on a smaller scale, like those weekly grandmother walks around Warsaw. The very fact that they were weekly, and that they started from the same spot and moved along well-trodden paths and followed a similar – albeit often updated in line with news and needs – repertoire of songs and chants; all of that contributed to the formation of solid, embodied and emplaced memories (Connerton, 1989; 2009; Casey, 2004; Zerubavel, 2003; Trigg, 2012), among the grandmothers themselves but also, possibly, among those who regularly crossed their paths, whether pedestrians, police officers, or shop owners along their routes.

Functioning as arendtian *spaces of appearance* the manifestations of the grandmothers did not merely lean on public space; they altered it, through their demanding and contrarian presence. What Arendt (1998 [1958]:199) took from the Greek city states, holds also for Warsaw today, namely that its fleeting spaces of appearance, which arise when people come together in 'the manner of speech and action', would never endure without the remembrance and narratives spun around them. Following Butler's (2015) reflections on Arendt, it is important to note that such spaces and actions are always 'bodily' and always 'supported'; that they lean on human hands and feet, and on pavements and sidewalks and infrastructures of care, transport and supply. In that spirit, much of the de-brief beers of the grandmothers every Thursday, after those hour-long walks, were dedicated not to the agenda of their action, but to all that stuff which supported it, and to all those traces it had left on their moods and

on their bodies. For starters, wherever they went for that beer, to a trendy bar or to a shady pub – they were greeted as friends and allies and allowed to spread their apparel and snacks as they wished, as if the owned the place. Cheerful chatting about the cookies on the table was then mixed with lively observations from the manifestation that just took place: did you see the guy on that corner who swore at me, or the lady on the balcony that smiled, or the strikingly friendly police officer, and so on? Efforts were also made to figure out if there was more sympathy than antipathy in the air today. And how did the current balance look in relation to last week, and the week before that, and what could those potential alterations indicate? Next to these questions, the grandmothers also shared their own exhausted, or joyous, or pained status, their hurting hips and knees, tired feet and minds, and they showed each other pictures of their grandkids, asked each other for help with personal issues, and recalled fresh and old political events, the one more outrageous than the other, but none of them more relevant, so it seemed, than their day-to-day concerns and pleasures.

Spending hours in those Warsaw pubs with the grandmothers, I came to think of them as places, or as instances, which enabled a sense of *biographical resonance* (Rosa, 2019: 300) through the intense and immediate 'co-presence of past, present and future' which appeared there, on a weekly basis. And I think it is reasonable to view the 'sensory experience' (Rosa, 2019: 300) that came from the braiding of this week's singing, with last week's chanting, and with life as a sprawly, unfinished whole, as yet another solid support (Butler, 2015) for the grandmothers struggles, next to the snacks on the table, shoes on their feet, and the streets they just walked.

Concluding remarks

What is the aftereffect of a hug between a subversive grandmother and a queer kid on the streets of Warsaw? What traces did *Polskie Babcie* leave on the cityscape and in the moods and memories of passers-by? How were the grandmothers' actions inscribed into their own bodies and ways of being together? And how did earlier memories inform their moves and practices, as they socialized with each other and carried out their manifestations across the capital? These are a few of the questions that came to me during fieldwork among the grandmothers and that were touched upon in this article. Now, I would like to dedicate its last paragraphs to some of the aspects of the grandmothers' mnemonic practices which I find worth including in further elaborations around the notion of slow memory.

In this text, I have emphasized the *relational* aspects of remembrance, both in the form of 'raw experiential materials' (Keightley, Pickering, 2017: 69) for people's memories, and in terms of where and how their remembrance usually comes about: in small, personal settings (Ricœur, 2004). While nuclear families are the prime example of mnemonic environments built on close bonds, the grandmothers make

a good case for expanding the notion of closeness beyond their confines. I would argue, furthermore, that the mnemonic practices of the grandmothers gain gravity and solidity by being tied both to their interpersonal relations *and* to their political struggles, today and in the past. What matters here in terms of what we might label *slow*, is that whichever dramatic experiences the grandmothers live and have lived through and/or refer to, these are always intermeshed with less spectacular practices of care and cohabitation. Cookies and protests cross-fertilize in the web of remembrance that the grandmothers spin together, as do older memories with newer ones, which brings me to my next point about the constant inflow of *fresh memories* to the community of the *Polskie Babcie*. Their de-brief beers, described above, illustrate the urgency with which the grandmothers incorporate new experiences into their ongoing sensemaking and storytelling. To be sure, this kind of instant collective remembering is anything but slow; it is speedy, sprawly and immediately mixed up with memories of older dates – usually related to Solidarity and the arrival of democracy – that matter to the here and now. What could be understood as *slow*, again, is the (mostly) vernacular (Keightley, Pickering, 2017) content and form of the grandmothers' remembrance, which was rarely about pomp- and circumstance commemoration, but about the joint handling of – and laughing and despairing around – life as they lived it. Moreover, these fresh-mixed-with-old memories seemed to function as a renewable resource fueling continuous agency, which brings me to my next point, related to the *repetitiveness* and *tirelessness* that characterized the oppositional practices of *Polskie Babcie* as they returned to *Rondo de Gaulle'a* each Thursday and repeated their routes and chants (even as new ones were added) and reiterated their solidaric ideals, like when the songs against Putin extended into tangible support for Ukraine or when their rainbow-colored banners prompted hugs across generations. Through the prism of *slow memory*, then, we can get better at grasping the significance of *fresh memories* and of *repeated practices,* when it comes to animating and sustaining solidaric struggles, whether they are carried out by subversive grandmothers or other people.

During their manifestations the grandmothers often sang a song called *Jeszcze w zielone gramy*; a title which alludes to a children's game called 'grać w zielone'. Loosely translated, the title in English would read 'We are still playing'. A popular song from the 1980s, its lyrics proclaim the need to keep singing, playing, dreaming and not 'dying yet', even as worries and hardships pile up on the journey through life. Sung collectively and publicly by this colorful group of – mostly – older women and men, it summoned the joy, tirelessness and determination with which they took to the street, one week after another. For me, the song also pointed in the direction of a (partial) answer to Rigney's compelling question (2018: 371): 'through what cultural forms and practices has the exercise of hope been made memorable?'. Drawing on the walks and worlds of *Polskie Babcie,* I would like to end this text by suggesting, somewhat tautologically, that hope seems particularly memorable through people's ongoing exercise of hope; through the continuation or revival of

the impulses, actions, and ways of singing and chatting and caring which instilled hope in the first place.

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