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Exploring spatial narratives: A study of local memoirs from small towns in the Warsaw region

O narracjach przestrzeni: studium lokalnych wspomnień z małych miasteczek regionu warszawskiego

Abstract

This article investigates how spatial structuring in local memoirs from small towns in the Warsaw region functions as a rhetorical strategy of memory. By analysing how authors organise their narratives around places, use ekphrasis to engage materiality, and revisit locations of personal significance, the study aims to demonstrate how individual memory is shaped and structured through space. The article further explores the tension between past and present in these memoirs, examining whether spatial narratives reinforce continuity or emphasise rupture in personal and collective memory. By embedding memory in physical spaces, the authors reinforce identity, bridge past and present, and pass down knowledge to future generations. Through a detailed analysis of spatial narratives, this article clarifies how memory functions not only as personal recollection but as a strategy for survival and intergenerational transmission.

W niniejszym artykule przedstawiono, w jaki sposób strukturyzacja przestrzenna w lokalnych pamiętnikach z miasteczek w regionie warszawskim funkcjonuje jako retoryczna strategia pamięci. Analizując sposób, w jaki autorzy organizują swoje narracje wokół miejsc, wykorzystując ekfrazę do angażowania materialności i powracając do miejsc o osobistym znaczeniu, badanie ma na celu wykazanie, jak indywidualna pamięć jest kształtowana i strukturyzowana przez przestrzeń. Autorka bada również napięcie między przeszłością a teraźniejszością w tych wspomnieniach, sprawdzając, czy narracje przestrzenne wzmacniają ciągłość, czy też podkreślają jej zerwanie w pamięci osobistej i zbiorowej. Osadzając pamięć w przestrzeniach fizycznych, autorzy pamiętników wzmacniają tożsamość, łączą przeszłość z teraźniejszością i przekazują wiedzę przyszłym pokoleniom. Poprzez szczegółową analizę narracji przestrzennych, w artykule wyjaśniono, w jaki sposób pamięć funkcjonuje nie tylko jako osobiste wspomnienia, ale także jako strategia przetrwania i przekazu międzypokoleniowego.

Key words

memory and place, local memoirs, local media, rhetorical memory, memoir writing techniques
pamięć i miejsce, wspomnienia lokalne, media lokalne, pamięć retoryczna, techniki pisania wspomnień

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Memory, memories and memoirs – rhetorical perspective

Memory is a prominent topic in contemporary humanistic research. This is evidenced by recent issues of journals like *Res Rhetorica* (2024, 11 [1]), which feature articles on collective memory, family reminiscences, and memories preserved through oral accounts. Memory as a rhetorical canon has undergone a “rehabilitation” in recent years. After being narrowly defined as mere memorization and mnemonic techniques, scholars have begun to emphasise its role as the foundation of all other rhetorical canons (Reynolds 1993, 4–5). However, most studies focus on collective or public memory, or on memory as an art – exploring whether and how the ancient *ars memoriae* can be adapted to contemporary needs – or alternatively, on retrieving and preserving the memory of marginalised groups (Vivian 2018).

The relationship between memory and space has been examined primarily through analyses of memory sites and the ways in which material monuments function as manifestations of collective memory (for example, Dickinson et al. 2010; Paliewicz & Hasian 2019). Other studies have explored the rhetorical use of everyday places, which sometimes become “involuntary” or unwanted sites of memory – what de Certeau (2011, 123–132) referred to as “ghosts of the city.” While these perspectives are valuable in understanding how spaces interact with memory, they primarily focus on public, institutionalised, or collective remembrance. This paper, however, shifts the focus from official memory sites to the practical strategies used by individuals to organise personal memories spatially.

I argue that for many amateur authors, structuring memories through spatial organization provides a functional and intuitive way of making sense of their past. Existing research has acknowledged the role of space in memory, but little attention has been given to how non-professional writers actively use spatial

frameworks to resolve narrative and cognitive challenges inherent in memoir writing. This paper explores these strategies, showing that spatial structuring is not just a descriptive tool but a rhetorical technique that enables authors to shape coherent and meaningful narratives out of fragmented recollections.

As Adams (2018) asserts, “even as scholars develop theories for understanding memory as rhetorical, there exists a continued need to grapple contextually and methodologically with memories (with all the dynamism they entail) that are encountered during field research.” Adams’ study, included in *Field Rhetoric* (Rai & Druschke 2018), explores methodologies for studying personal memory in field settings, particularly oral histories. However, while field rhetoric typically examines live storytelling, performances, or oral traditions, this study focuses on written personal narratives – self-published or locally published memoirs by non-professional authors.

This study examines how spatial memory functions as an organising principle in amateur memoirs and what rhetorical techniques these authors employ to navigate their recollections. Rather than focusing on abstract theories of space and memory, it investigates specific, observable strategies that allow individuals to externalise and structure their memories. Nearly two decades ago, a volume titled *Retoryka codzienności* (edited by Marcjanik, 2006) was published, exploring how Polish speakers develop rhetorical strategies to navigate various aspects of everyday life. The studies in that collection examined how individuals construct effective communication strategies – from everyday interactions like apologising or telling jokes to responding to major social events. I take a similar perspective, but instead of looking at everyday speech, I focus on how memoirists consciously or unconsciously structure their personal narratives through spatial frameworks. In this sense, effectiveness is not just about communicative success but also about memory management – about finding ways to organise and retrieve recollections in ways that feel natural and functional for the author.

A relevant theoretical precedent for this study is the work of Pruchnic and Lacey (2011), who discuss how memory transitions from internal, unstructured recollections to externalised forms. Although their analysis does not focus on memoirs, it highlights the cognitive and rhetorical challenges of transferring memory to a structured medium. This process requires organising material not only for coherence but also to ensure that the very structure of the text enhances its communicative and mnemonic function. Spatial structuring, as I argue, is one of the most effective techniques for achieving this.

Samantha Senda-Cook (2020, 421–422) notes that memory studies are often structured along two axes: place and identity. The first concerns the use of place for mnemonic functions, while the second examines how memories are constructed

to support identity. This study builds on that framework but takes it in a new direction, examining how amateur memoirists actively shape their narratives through spatial organization – not just to reinforce identity but to impose order on fragmented recollections. The authors of the analysed memoirs achieve different but complementary goals: they retrieve memories, organise them for themselves, and give them meaning – both for their own understanding and for others – by constructing a structured narrative around space.

This study focuses on the memories of small-town inhabitants, published either by local institutions or self-published by the authors. These recollections, often concerning World War II and the communist era, are written from a decades-later perspective and intended for a local audience. Many of these personal recollections have long existed in opposition to public memory. Official “sites of memory” did not serve as meaningful memory sites for their authors, while their actual places of memory often remained unacknowledged in public discourse. This is particularly true for memories from the communist period in Poland. Some authors deliberately distanced themselves from public memory and official memorial sites, shielding their private lives from such influences for decades. In this sense, their memory is “semipublic” – something widely known within a given community but not openly discussed. Some authors recount failed attempts to establish memorial sites for the events described in their diaries (Krzyczkowski 2003, 41–42). Similarly, Holocaust survivors often needed many years before they could revisit sites of their imprisonment or hiding, as well as public memory sites related to that era, such as museums at former extermination camps. This reflects a distinct historical process of identification – or non-identification – with public memory sites. However, the focus of this study is on the private dimension of memory: how authors actively use space to retrieve, order, and communicate their recollections.

Authors and their memoirs: Navigating the challenges of memory

The authors of the analysed memoirs face a range of challenges in documenting their past. Unlike professional historians or literary memoirists, these individuals are not trained writers, nor do they have access to extensive archival materials to corroborate their recollections. Their accounts rely heavily on personal memory, often shaped by the passage of time, traumatic experiences, and emotional attachment to specific places.

In many cases, decades separate the events described from the act of writing, making the process of recalling details both difficult and selective. For Holocaust survivors and those who lived through the turmoil of war and political repression, certain memories may be fragmentary, painful, or influenced by post-war

reconstructions of local history. Moreover, the sense of belonging to the places they describe is often complicated – some authors were forcibly displaced, while others remained but saw their communities transformed beyond recognition. Given these difficulties, the memoirists in this study often struggled with how to shape their narratives in a way that would be both meaningful and coherent. As this article will demonstrate, a crucial technique for resolving this challenge was structuring memories around space. However, before arriving at this solution, many of these authors first experimented with different media and narrative forms, testing ways to organise their recollections before committing them to written memoirs.

Local memoirs from the analysed sub-Warsaw microregion can be categorised into two distinct groups. The first group consists of accounts written by former residents, often Jewish, of small towns like Grodzisk or Pruszków. These memoirists recall their childhood experiences in these towns, having emigrated and not revisited them for decades, often returning only in their old age. Representing this group are the memoirs of Rita Ross (2013, trans. 2016) and Elsa Thon (2013, trans. 2015) from Pruszków, as well as Faiga Burman (2003, trans. 2020) from Grodzisk. All three authors survived the Holocaust as young girls and later emigrated – Thon and Burman to Canada, and Ross to Australia. The return of Burman and Ross to their hometowns after many decades served as the impetus for writing and publishing their memoirs. These accounts, which have been translated from English into Polish, were published by the local library in Pruszków and a local association in Grodzisk.

The second group comprises memoirs from individuals who either spent their entire lives or the majority of them in these suburban towns, or those who moved away but maintained strong ties to their hometowns, often visiting and keeping in touch with friends and family still living there. This group includes the memoirs of Henryk Krzyczkowski (1989, 2nd ed. 2009) and Tadeusz Jakubowski (2009, 2nd ed. 2014, 3rd ed. 2017) from Pruszków. Krzyczkowski's memoirs delve further back, starting before World War I. Grodzisk is represented by the memoirs of Krystyna Poraj (2001), Anna Sobieszczkańska-Lissowska (2016), and the unpublished memoirs of Witold Zalewski (1986). All these authors were young adults or children during the war, with their narratives spanning from the 1930s to the 1950s (Zalewski) and 1980s (Sobieszczkańska-Lissowska); Poraj concludes her memoirs in the 1930s. Alicja Szafrńska's book (2011, 2nd ed. 2013) presents a somewhat different approach: in addition to the main section comprising her own memoirs, the author includes contributions from other individuals, incorporating their statements, diary excerpts, and conversations. The memoirs primarily focus on Grodzisk from the 1930s to the 1960s, but they do not maintain a consistent, uninterrupted chronological continuity. The collection is supplemented by

Zbigniew Niewiadomski's (2004) memoirs from the smaller town of Brwinów, covering a period from the 1930s to the 1950s. With the exception of Poraj, all the authors describe traumatic experiences related to the loss of close ones during the war: friends, parents, and often entire families, as well as the loss of their homes.

All authors and their families were often quite mobile and not necessarily natives of Grodzisk or Pruszków. Faiga Burman's parents lived in Odesa for a period of time, Rita Ross's parents were from Kharkiv, Zalewski's family spent time in Cleveland, USA, and Elsa Thon's father went to work in Uruguay. Similarly, Sobieszkańska-Lissowska and Krzyczkowski had no long-standing familial ties to Grodzisk and Pruszków, as their parents moved there due to job opportunities. Some authors spent only a part of their lives in the towns they describe, with some residing there for a relatively brief period. Nevertheless, all authors still choose to present these small towns as pivotal to their identities. They depict these places not merely as geographical locations but as integral elements of their personal and familial narratives.

Through various media: Seeking the right space for memoirs

Before committing their memoirs to paper, authors often experimented with different storytelling formats, seeking the most effective way to externalise and organise their memories. These trials across various media were not incidental but formed an integral part of the memory process, influencing both content and structure. The first and most natural medium is oral storytelling – sharing memories with family, friends, and colleagues, or recounting experiences at school reunions, educational events, or commemorations such as ceremonies marking the liberation of a concentration camp. The location of these retellings can be deeply significant – the same story takes on a different weight and emotional intensity when told at the very site where the events occurred (Burman & Wajcer 2003, 205–206). The act of remembrance is shaped not only by the content of the story but also by the physical setting in which it is recalled.

When authors decide to preserve what was once transmitted in a fleeting, oral form, they must choose the appropriate medium. This choice, in a way, mirrors their relationship with place – just as they select a setting for memory, they also select a space for their memoirs to exist. The first step is often recording their recollections. Faiga Burman recorded two extensive interviews for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum before writing her memoirs, but she was dissatisfied with the outcome (Burman 2003, 201). Similarly, Rita Ross recorded her memories (Ross 1996), as did Anna Sobieszkańska-Lissowska, whose CD recording was later included with her published book. Elsa Thon took a different

approach – she recorded herself reading excerpts from her memoirs, some of which were later used in a short film (Thon 2017). These examples illustrate the shift from the private, family sphere to institutional spaces such as archives and museums. The next step in this progression is often the publication of a book, making the memoirs accessible to the wider public.

Another medium through which memories transition from the private to the public realm is local journalism. Fragments of memoirs, individual chapters, or additional recollections are frequently published in regional newspapers. Henryk Krzyczkowski published 20 articles in *Przegląd Pruszkowski* between 1983 and 2008, some of which later became chapters in his memoirs, while others served as supplementary reflections. *Przegląd Pruszkowski* also featured ten articles by Tadeusz Jakubowski, expanding upon his published memoirs. Similarly, Witold Zalewski contributed sporadically to *Bogoria*, a local periodical in Grodzisk Mazowiecki.

Thus, for these authors, the choice of place is not limited to the locations they describe in their memoirs. It also extends to the places of storytelling – the settings where memory is shared and preserved. The act of remembering is not only about recounting the past but also about selecting the appropriate medium and space in which to inscribe memory, ensuring that it remains alive and meaningful (Wright 2005). The next section of this article will examine how authors ultimately resolve the challenges of fragmented memory by employing spatial organization as a rhetorical and cognitive strategy.

Scattered beads and shifting patterns: the struggle to navigate memory

Authors of local memoirs often emphasise that memory is both precise and unreliable, rich in detail yet inherently fragmented. Some recall minute details from decades ago, such as the phone number for their first job interview (Zalewski 1986, 16) or the exact arrangement of furniture in their childhood home (Thon 2013, preface). Other memories, however, prove elusive – Anna Sobieszczkańska-Lissowska (2016, 24) remembers the moment of a marriage proposal but cannot recall the face of the man who proposed. Henryk Krzyczkowski (2009, 61) wonders why he can vividly recall his male classmates but has no memory of his female peers: “I don't remember their names or surnames, I don't remember their faces, clothes, or hairstyles...”

This unpredictability of memory – the ability to preserve some details with striking clarity while letting others fade – creates a fundamental challenge for memoirists. How can they shape a coherent narrative when their recollections emerge in fragments, without a clear structure? Sometimes memory fails to

reveal what is desired, while at other times it overwhelms with a flood of images that threaten to disrupt the narrative (Zalewski 1986, 99). Authors compare this experience to a kaleidoscope, where recollections shift and rearrange into ever-changing patterns (Ross 2016, 12), or to fragments lodged in brain cells, inaccessible when most needed (Zalewski 1986, 99). Others liken their memories to a scattered string of beads, where individual recollections may be vivid, but without an organising thread, they remain disjointed (Szafrńska 2011, 93).

Faced with this instability, authors not only seek to recall their past but also to impose order on it. The next sections will show that one of the most effective ways they achieve this is through spatial structuring – anchoring their recollections in specific locations, organising their stories around places that serve as points of reference and connection. By linking memories to physical spaces, they create a framework that helps bring together fragmented recollections into a coherent and meaningful whole.

Structuring memory through spatial connection

Having struggled with the unpredictability and fragmentation of memory, memoirists find a way to impose order on their recollections through spatial structuring. Rather than following a strictly linear chronology or thematic divisions common in literary memoirs, they build their narratives like a journey through space, moving outward from the most intimate and private settings to the wider townscape. This spatial progression provides a natural scaffold for recalling and organising memories, allowing them to move seamlessly between recollections without losing coherence.

A recurring pattern in these memoirs is a gradual expansion of space: authors begin with detailed descriptions of their rooms, the layout of their homes, and familiar domestic objects before progressing outward to the backyard, the street, local businesses, and eventually, the broader town or city. This structural framework can be seen in the works of Krystyna Poraj, Zbigniew Niewiadomski, and Henryk Krzyczkowski, whose memoirs develop as spatial journeys, expanding from personal interiors to shared community spaces. A particularly striking example comes from Krzyczkowski's (2009) account of a childhood kitchen, where every element is precisely catalogued:

The kitchen served not only as a space for preparing meals but also as a dining room and a washing corner. On a stool rested a basin, flanked by two buckets – one for clean water and the other for dirty. The stove was built of white tiles, with an oven for baking and four burners, each covered with metal rings. A coal box was positioned as close to the stove as possible, leaving little room to spare, as a table surrounded by chairs occupied the remaining space. (2009, 19)

These descriptions are meticulous, dense with lists of furniture, household objects, and their precise placement. While such detail has sometimes been viewed as excessive or amateurish – an overloading of mundane observations – within the memoirists' framework, it serves a critical purpose. Each object functions as a trigger for memory, much like the loci in the classical method or “memory palace” technique. Instead of abstract recall, memory is anchored in physical space, with each remembered item serving as a link to a broader network of associations.

For memoirists, this spatial structuring is not simply a stylistic choice but a cognitive strategy. By moving through familiar locations, they reconstruct entire episodes of the past. A piece of furniture is not merely described – it recalls the person who used it, the events surrounding it, and the emotions tied to it. In Poraj’s memoirs, the recollection of a doctor visiting a sick child at home naturally leads to memories of the pharmacy. From there, the memory expands into a vivid sensory reconstruction of the pharmacy interior, the process of preparing medicine, and the childhood experience of taking bitter prescriptions. This, in turn, triggers a recollection of the outdoor market, where vendors sold leeches for medical treatments:

On market days, leech vendors would wander the stalls, calling out ‘Pija-week! Pija-week!’ [Leeches! Leeches!] with a distinct emphasis on the last syllable. (Poraj 2001, 43)

This natural flow of memories through physical locations is a defining feature of these memoirs. Instead of abrupt thematic shifts or imposed narrative breaks, the structure mirrors the way memories emerge organically – one place leading to another, one object linking to another recollection. The detailed enumeration of objects and locations, often seen as a hallmark of amateur writing, is not merely an accumulation of facts; rather, it provides the connective tissue of the narrative, ensuring that individual memories are linked within a structured and meaningful whole.

Beyond aiding recall, spatial structuring shapes the entire composition of these memoirs. Major shifts in location often mark turning points in the author’s life, serving as natural chapter divisions. Relocations – whether voluntary or forced – become structuring devices, signalling transitions in identity, relationships, and self-perception. For instance, in *The Sum of Three* (Ross 2013), the author's identity is directly tied to different places: as a child in her family's apartment in Pruszków, she is Rutka; while in hiding with a Polish family during the Nazi occupation, she is Jadzia; after emigrating to Australia, she becomes Rita. The book is structured around these shifts, with each section titled according to the name she used in a particular place.

Unlike literary memoirs, which often rely on introspective reflection or thematic unity, amateur memoirists structure their narratives around spatial continuity. This approach allows them to organise scattered recollections while ensuring that detailed descriptions remain integral to the overall composition.

Evoking the past through objects, sensations, and mementos

For memoirists who struggle with fragmented recollections, physical objects and sensory experiences serve as powerful anchors, connecting memories to specific places and events. Yet, many local authors lack material mementos – war, displacement, and time have erased much of their tangible past. In response, they either repurpose existing artifacts or fabricate memory props to reconstruct lost connections.

When preserved memorabilia are available, they act as prompts for recollection. However, surviving photographs are often incomplete or unrelated to the period described. Faiga Burman (2003) supplements her wartime recollections with pre-war images of her family and later photos of her life in Canada. Younger authors, like Szafrńska (2011, 49), turn to digital archives and social media to retrieve traces of the past.

In the absence of physical artifacts, some authors create their own. Anna Sobieszczńska-Lissowska (2016) incorporates family photographs into her memoirs, while her publisher supplements them with archival images and staged reenactments – photographs of a child in period costume standing in for the young author. Witold Zalewski (1986, 53) playfully links an indentation in a Warsaw sidewalk to the many hours he spent waiting for his fiancée. Though written with humor, this connection ties a fleeting moment to a specific place, embedding it not only in his own memory but also in that of his grandchildren – who, passing down Bracka Street, will always recall his story. The act of marking a location, even retroactively, becomes a way of imposing presence on absence, transforming an ephemeral moment into a concrete link to the past.

Some memory objects are consciously collected. Krzyczkowski (2009, 126) keeps a shard of glass from a broken window during street fights in Warsaw in 1926. Jakubowski (2014, 127) preserves the clothing of his uncle Zygmunt, who perished in a concentration camp – until time forces him to dispose of it through an improvised ritual: he burns the fabric and buries the ashes under a pear tree planted in Zygmunt's honour. Each of these practices ties memory to specific physical locations – a pavement slab, a tree, a market stall – turning the geography of everyday life into an extension of personal history.

Beyond objects, sensory details – smell, taste, sound – become triggers for memory, filling gaps where artifacts are missing. Niewiadomski (2004) embeds song lyrics in his memoirs, using music to recreate the emotional texture of his school years. Szafrńska (2011) conjures scents: fresh bread from a bakery, ink and paper from a bookstore, the sharp smell of leather in a handbag shop. Jakubowski (2014, 79) recalls the taste of roasted potato peels, a wartime staple, while Zalewski (1986, 10) remembers the bean soup of kindergarten days. These sensations ground the past in bodily experience, transforming ephemeral recollections into something almost tangible.

Ekphrasis – detailed description designed to stimulate vivid mental images – plays a crucial role in this process. As Webb (2009, 40) notes, in its classical sense, ekphrasis was not limited to art; it encompassed any passage that activated the imagination and bridged the distance between past and present. This is precisely what local memoirists attempt. Szafrńska (2011, 80) describes the ritual of opening a bottle of orangeade:

And every child's dream – orangeade with that almost archaic, springy wire closure on a porcelain white cork with a red rubber seal. Just opening such a bottle was a delightful experience – ‘Will it explode or not?’ The hissing from the gas release and the ‘bubbles’ on the tongue, sometimes even in the nose.

While these memories are vividly reconstructed, they remain anchored in the past. Most authors do not attempt to recreate these sensations in the present. The exception is Ross (2016, 200–251), who, in an effort to relive the past repeatedly orders cheesecake every time she visits Poland hoping to match the taste of one her father brought her during the war. The elusive flavour remains a reminder that some aspects of the past can only exist in memory.

Objects, tastes, and sensory experiences thus become more than mere recollections – they serve as structural elements in these memoirs, providing continuity and bridging the distance between fragmented memories. Whether tangible or imagined, they root personal history in specific spaces and physical sensations, reinforcing the connection between place, material culture, and narrative composition.

Journeys to places of memory

For many memoirists, memory is not static – it is tied to movement, both physical and imagined. Returning to places associated with their past allows them not only to revisit personal history but also to structure their narratives, connecting different moments in time and expanding their recollections beyond personal experience. These journeys vary in scale and significance: they range from transcontinental

trips back to Poland after decades of absence to brief visits to a familiar street or railway station. In some cases, when physical return is impossible, memory itself becomes the site of travel.

Some of these journeys involve great physical distance and emotional preparation. For authors like Faiga Burman and Rita Ross, travelling from Canada or Australia to Poland marks a profound confrontation with the past. Ross's first return to Poland came after years of hesitation, triggered by the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II and the resurgence of war memories in public discourse (Ross 2016, 153). Over time, these journeys became routine, yet each visit allowed her to uncover new layers of memory. Her exploration extended beyond the places she had personally known as a child – she travelled to Kosów Lacki, reconstructing the life of relatives she had never met. Through this journey, she expanded her memoir's scope, integrating personal recollections with family history and imagined reconstructions (Ross 2016, 195).

Sometimes, revisiting a seemingly ordinary place can trigger profound memory work. Niewiadomski (2004, 27) recalls being tasked as an eight-year-old with digging air-raid shelters in a field that is now a busy street and taxi stand. This once-significant site has been absorbed into the fabric of daily life, yet for him, its memory remains vivid. Similarly, for Burman, something as simple as seeing an unchanged iron gate in Grodzisk – one of the few remaining elements from her childhood environment – becomes a powerful link between past and present:

And suddenly, before my eyes, there it was: the same iron gate, the same entrance to the courtyard. Everything else had changed, but this one thing remained. I reached out to touch it, half-expecting it to dissolve like a mirage. (Burman and Wajcer 2003, 201)

A recurring motif in these memoirs is *ubi sunt* – a lament for what has vanished. Revisiting familiar locations often reveals dramatic changes, underscoring the impermanence of both places and people. Krystyna Poraj (2001) structures her recollections street by street, listing buildings that once stood and people who once lived there. Even when only faint traces remain – such as the overgrown outline of a former flowerbed – these remnants serve as entry points into the past. This approach is also seen in the works of Szafrńska, Jakubowski, and Krzyczkowski, who use site-based descriptions to reestablish lost connections.

Pilgrimages to sites of memory, such as visiting the graves of loved ones, are significant practices frequently explored by authors in their writings. When these pilgrimages are not possible, authors often convey a profound sense of loss and unfulfillment. This is particularly relevant for those whose loved ones perished in the Holocaust, but not exclusively. Niewiadomski (2004, 16) regrets not knowing the location of his cherished teacher's grave, expressing a deep wish to visit and

“bow his now grey head in deep gratitude.” For others, the absence of a specific location to return to intensifies their sense of disconnection.

When physical travel is not possible, journeys take place in the imagination. Some authors mentally reconstruct towns and neighbourhoods, street by street, filling in details from memory. Elsa Thon (2013) recalls playing a game with a friend in Israel, where they attempted to remember every family that once lived in Pruszków, only to be overcome with emotion. Jakubowski (2014, 15) describes his late-life habit of travelling not through geography but through time, reconstructing the past in “pictures, miniatures, snapshots.”

Beyond personal catharsis, these journeys – both real and imagined – serve a structural function in memoir writing. They provide a natural framework for organising recollections, allowing authors to integrate past and present. Writing about travel allows memoirists to weave together different temporal perspectives – past, present, and even future. A return to a childhood home not only evokes memories of lost relatives but also highlights the changes in both the physical landscape and the author’s own identity. These journeys often take place alongside children or grandchildren, creating a bridge between generations and embedding personal history within a broader familial context. By structuring their narratives around visits to memory sites, authors can seamlessly transition between recollections, reflections on the present, and considerations of how these places will be remembered in the future.

Bookend technique

The motif of travel provides a structural framework for these memoirs, with a return to childhood or youthful places often serving as a natural narrative closure. These returns are not just personal acts of remembrance but deliberate compositional choices that bring coherence to the text. What was once a collection of fragmented recollections – scattered like loose beads – becomes a structured, meaningful whole. By circling back to formative places, authors establish a sense of narrative unity and reinforce the overarching themes of resilience, transformation, and identity.

Authors are fully aware of this framing device and employ it deliberately to create a sense of completion and emotional resonance. For instance, Witold Zalewski dedicates a significant portion of his memoirs to his year-long military service at the Officer Cadet School in Pułtusk, which he completed in 1938. As a distinguished student, his name was inscribed on a stone plaque at the entrance. When he returns 40 years later, he discovers that the plaque was destroyed during the German occupation. However, he meets a stonemason who had carved his

name all those years ago and still remembers it. Reflecting on this encounter, Zalewski remarks, “the circle is complete” (Zalewski 1986, 25).

The bookend technique is a common way to conclude memoirs, often marked by a physical return to places of childhood or early adulthood. A prevalent pattern involves authors revisiting locations from an impoverished youth, now viewing them through the lens of personal success. This success manifests in various ways – many emphasise their stable and prosperous family lives, returning to familiar places with spouses, children, grandchildren, or friends. Their perspective blends nostalgia with a quiet sense of achievement, as they reflect on their journey from modest beginnings to professional and financial stability. These returns serve as more than personal reflection – they affirm the narrative arc of perseverance and triumph, ensuring that the memoir does not merely recount the past but also delivers a broader message of continuity and accomplishment.

Revisiting traumatic sites, such as concentration camps, often underscores the quest for closure. The description of the March of the Living provides a poignant conclusion to Burman’s memoirs:

We marched the three kilometers from Auschwitz to Birkenau. We marched along the same road where I had once been herded as a slave and guarded by the SS and their dogs. But this time I was marching with dignity as a free Jew surrounded by my children and proudly carrying a Torah presented to me by Rabbi Grusssgot from the Montreal Shaar Hashomayim synagogue. In my wildest dreams of freedom I could never have envisioned that this would one day be possible. The Polish population looked on. Where they had once watched us as wretches marching to our deaths, they now watched us march for the living with our heads held high and our eyes triumphant. (Burman & Wajcer 2003, 204)

There is also a second closure to Burman’s memories. At the beginning of her memoirs, she recounts an incident from her childhood when the daughter of the landlady refused to play with her, spat in her face, and called her a Jew. Over half a century later, Faiga returns to Grodzisk and her former family home, where she encounters that same girl – now an elderly, frail, impoverished, and lonely woman. In contrast, Faiga is surrounded by her children and grandchildren, is a prosperous Canadian citizen, and a distinguished guest in Poland. This encounter provides such a significant sense of closure that she not only uses it as a concluding point in her memoirs but also begins her recorded interview with this moment (USHMM 2006).

However, the absence of closure can be just as narratively significant as its attainment. The inability to return to a crucial place or to relive a defining moment often manifests as a lingering sense of incompleteness, as if an essential ritual remains unfulfilled. This feeling is poignantly illustrated in Rita Ross's narrative when the current owners of the apartment in Pruszków – where she and her family

hid throughout the war – refuse to let her in. For Ross, returning to this place was particularly significant; it was not merely a former residence but the space where she and her loved ones spent years in near-total confinement, suspended between fear and survival. It is a poignant story of the author's repeated attempts to gain entry, as she pleads with the current owners for just a brief glance at the room where she hid during the occupation. Her requests are ultimately denied. This unresolved tension stands in stark contrast to other memoirs that conclude with triumphant returns, reinforcing the idea that while narrative framing can create coherence, it cannot always provide resolution.

Passing down practical knowledge: Reframing space for future generations

Returning to childhood places serves not only as a means of closure, completing the narrator's life story, but also as a way of passing down practical knowledge. These memoirs do more than preserve individual experiences; they actively reshape the way places are understood by descendants and local communities. The act of remembering is not confined to nostalgia – it is a call to see spaces differently, to recognise them as sites of past struggles, resilience, and transformation.

Many local memoirs were initially written for family members or a close circle of friends before the authors decided to make them public. Their primary purpose was often to encourage and strengthen future generations: “I managed in such difficult times, so will you.” These stories highlight the resourcefulness and adaptability required to navigate both everyday struggles and moments of extreme adversity. Small, seemingly trivial anecdotes become vital lessons. For instance, little Faiga observes street thieves in Warsaw using a crowbar with a nail at the end to steal schnitzels through a window. Years later, in a concentration camp, she remembers this technique and uses it to steal potatoes, saving herself and her friends from starvation (Burman & Wajcer, 2003, 20, 170). Zalewski, who worked in commerce and as a production manager, had a passion for opera singing. This talent ultimately saves his life during the Warsaw Uprising – when he and his sister sing a duet from *La Traviata*, they are spared execution (Zalewski, 1986, 63). After the war, when his underground past prevents him from finding work in his profession, he reinvents himself as an opera singer. Other memoirs tell of life-saving skills such as retouching photographs (Thon, 2013) or simply knowing how to navigate a particular social or physical environment. These anecdotes are not just personal recollections; they serve as blueprints for resilience, demonstrating how resourcefulness and knowledge – sometimes of the most unexpected kind – can become tools for survival.

Authors, fully aware of the importance of continuity, deliberately encourage their children and grandchildren to maintain family traditions, visit meaningful locations, and engage with history in tangible ways. Ross (2016, 199) asks her daughter to bring her children and grandchildren to the synagogue in Kosów Lacki, where her grandparents were married. The physical return to sites of family history transforms abstract memory into a lived experience, linking past generations with the present and future through shared space.

If the memoir is not addressed to descendants, it is often directed at the present-day residents of the towns being described. Authors oscillate between two perspectives: on one hand, they present the past as something irretrievably lost, enclosed in a “glass sphere” (Poraj, 2001, 151) or reduced to a “faint shadow” (Sobieszczkańska-Lissowska, 2016, 51). On the other, they argue that the past is still embedded in the landscape itself. The streets, and often the houses, are still there – if not the buildings themselves, then at least the memory of what once stood in their place. These memoirs encourage readers to see familiar places with “new eyes”, recognising, for example, that an ordinary, run-down house was once the heart of a family’s entire world. By shifting perspectives on space, authors invite their audience – whether relatives or strangers – to reconsider their own environments as places infused with memory.

The bookend technique becomes even more powerful when combined with this practice of shared remembrance. Memoirs often begin with *pre-memory* – stories passed down by parents and grandparents, intertwined with historical sources and the author’s imagination. By the end of the narrative, the focus shifts toward the future: the lives of children and grandchildren, or the present and future residents of the towns being described. This symmetry is more than just a structural choice; it reflects the essence of these memoirs. They are not solely about preserving the past – they aim to transmit knowledge, shape identity, and ensure that places once tied to personal history become sites of collective reflection.

In this spirit, many authors conclude their works with a direct appeal to their readers, asking for a generous and understanding reception. They are acutely aware of their limitations, acknowledging, as Niewiadomski (2004, 205) puts it, that their memoirs are “unfortunately just amateurish efforts.” But these are not mere words of humility. For the authors, the act of writing is more than personal catharsis – it is a spatial and rhetorical intervention, a call to action. They invite their readers to walk the same streets with new awareness, to carry forward the lessons of the past into the present and future, and to recognise the hidden histories embedded in everyday spaces. These memoirs are not just records of personal memory but a means of reshaping the perception of place, transforming familiar locations into sites of reflection, learning, and engagement with history.

Memory anchored in place: Structure, meaning, and continuity

The connection between memory and space in these local memoirs is not incidental but an effective strategy that allows amateur authors to manage and structure their recollections. Far from being a mere backdrop, space serves as an organising principle that operates across multiple levels, enabling these memoirists to make sense of their fragmented pasts and present their stories in a coherent and meaningful way.

Spatial structuring provides a clear and functional narrative. Authors use spatial logic to shape the flow of narrative, structure of composition, and engagement with their audience. The progression from intimate domestic spaces to wider public settings is a common organising pattern, yet it often intertwines with bookending, where a return to childhood locations provides narrative closure, or with a “house by house, street by street” approach that systematically reconstructs a remembered world. These techniques are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary strategies that work together to impose coherence on memory.

Space is not only a mnemonic device, aiding in the recall of past events, but also a rhetorical tool that strengthens the connection between the author and their audience. Detailed descriptions of interiors, streets, and everyday objects – sometimes dismissed as excessive or stylistically unrefined – serve a crucial function beyond individual memory recall. They create shared spaces of remembrance, making the memoirs not just personal documents but narratives that resonate with family members, local communities, and future generations.

At first glance, this connection between memory and urban space might seem to echo De Certeau’s concept of “ghosts in the city” – traces of the past that linger uneasily within modern landscapes, disconnected from the present. However, the amateur memoirists in this study do not treat remnants of the past as spectral interruptions or as elements that disrupt the flow of time. Instead, they perceive these traces as integral components of both place and identity. When Faiga Burman encounters the iron gate of her childhood home, she does not see it as a relic haunting the present but as a tangible bridge between past and future. Similarly, Krzyczkowski’s depiction of Stalowa Street in Pruszków acknowledges urban change, but rather than lamenting the loss of the past, he integrates memory into the evolving cityscape.

These memoirs do not dwell on fragmentation and loss but emphasise continuity and incorporation. By structuring their narratives around space, authors transform scattered recollections into a continuous and intelligible whole.

These amateur memoirs are not about loss and estrangement but about continuity, adaptation, and reconciliation with change. Memory does not function here as a lament for what is gone but as a means of rooting the self in a shifting

world. The ability to return to childhood places with both emotional connection and critical distance underscores the idea that memory does not fragment identity but reinforces it. Through these memoirs, space is not just remembered – it is strategically employed as a rhetorical tool, allowing authors to structure their narratives, navigate fragmented recollections, and effectively communicate their experiences. By anchoring memory in physical locations, they create a framework that compensates for gaps, imposes coherence, and facilitates transmission, ensuring that their stories remain accessible and compelling despite the challenges of time, trauma, and amateur authorship.

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