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A model of roadside memorials in Poland

Abstract. The aim of the paper is to present a model of the principal driving forces responsible for the proliferation of roadside memorials in Poland. Based on desk research, fieldwork and interviews, a three dimensional model has been developed. There are three dimensions of roadside memorials: 1) global, 2) societal, and 3) individual. Each of the dimensions is composed of two pairs of distinctive elements, i. e. motoring heritage and memorial mania, wayside crosses and cemetery traditions, and trauma and religiosity.

Keywords: cemetery traditions, memorial crosses, roadside memorials, roadside crosses.

A roadside memorial is composed of objects (e.g. flowers, candles, crosses, boulders), placed at a particular location beside pavements or right-of-way, in order to mark the site of a fatal accident. Erecting such memorials is becoming an increasingly popular practice in Australia, New Zealand, both Americas and Europe (Everett, 2002; Owen 2011; Welsh, 2017; Bednar, 2020). Roadside memorials are a culturally determined form of expressing grief (Nešporová & Stahl, 2014). They are maintained as long as the memorial builders need them as places of remembrance, ritual and communication (Klaassens et al., 2009). Roadside memorials have been studied with respect to their material features, distribution, impact on road safety and their meaning for the people who erected them. Scholars have also been trying to identify general determinants which contribute to the occurrence of roadside memorials in the contemporary world. Based on the case of Poland, the paper is a voice in the discussion about the origins of roadside memorialisation in countries of Christian heritage, where crosses are often placed at the sites of fatal road accidents.

Some scholars (Everett, 2002; Clark & Cheshire, 2003; Welsh, 2017) have referred to them as roadside crosses while others – as memorial crosses (Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Bednar, 2013).

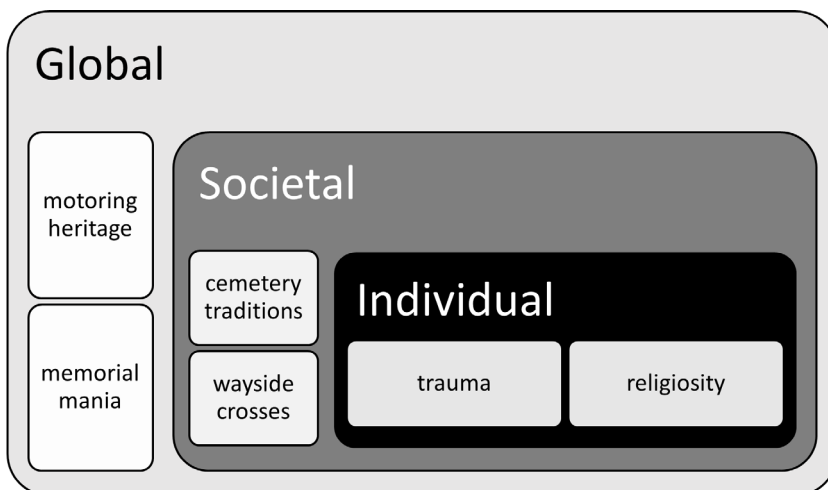
The author has been investigating roadside memorials since 2009 (Przybylska, 2011; 2016). The data used in this paper mainly come from the three-year project (2017–2020), entitled “Memorial crosses along Polish roads”, sponsored by the National Science Centre, Poland (No 2016/21/B/HS1/00823). Most results have already been published in English in international journals (e.g. Przybylska & Flaga, 2019; Przybylska et al, 2020; Przybylska, 2021) and in a book in Polish (Przybylska, 2022). The aim of the paper is to present a model of the principal driving forces responsible for the proliferation of roadside memorials in Poland. The model has neither been published nor presented at conferences so far. It is a new conceptualisation based on the above mentioned materials obtained by desk research, the field observations and photographic documentation of 156 roadside memorials along national roads (593 km) and 12 semi-structured interviews with people engaged in the erection of roadside memorials (Przybylska, 2022). The structure of the paper reflects a three-dimensional model. A short discussion and conclusions close the paper.

A roadside memorial model

Roadside memorials` driving forces are either rooted in global culture, are typical for Poles, or vary from person to person. Thus, there are three dimensions of roadside memorials in Poland to be distinguished: 1) global, 2) societal, and 3) individual (Fig. 1).

Figure 1

The integrated model of global, societal, and individual driving forces of roadside memorials in Poland.



Source: author's own study.

In other words, three dimensions of roadside memorials are based on world trends, societal practices, and unique biographies. Each of the dimensions is composed of two pairs of distinctive elements, i. e. motoring heritage and memorial mania, wayside crosses and cemetery traditions, and trauma and religiosity. Each model is a schematic, e. i. a simplified picture of reality. It may happen that some cases do not fit the model. However, these are rare cases.

Global context: motoring heritage and memorial mania

Roadside memorialisation is a manifestation of a broader culture (Clark & Cheshire, 2004). It was assumed that motoring heritage and memorial mania are global driving forces leading to the proliferation of roadside memorials. Clark (2008, p. 27) states that "the roadside has become a museum that displays a challenging motoring heritage". Roadside memorials reintroduce a problematic modern road death into public debate. They challenge the idea of motoring heritage based on progress, romance and achievement. For Bednar (2020), a road trauma shrine, as he calls a roadside memorial, is not only a materialization of individual people's trauma but also a materialization of a larger cultural trauma, associated with cars and car culture. Death on the roads is not only an Australian (Clark, 2008) or American problem (Bednar, 2020). The global status report on road safety (2018) indicates that road traffic injuries are now the leading killer of people aged 5–29, and the number of annual road traffic deaths has reached 1.35 million.

Roadside memorials are perceived as "a unique subset of the wide practice of spontaneous memorialization" (Clark & Cheshire, 2004, p. 206), a particular form of grassroots memorials (Margry & Sanchez-Carretero, 2011) or temporary memorials within the contemporary trend of memorial mania (Doss, 2010). In the past few decades, the increasing number of memorials in the US led Doss (2010) to coin the term "memorial mania". She argues that at the turn of the 20th century, statue mania rested on a coherent, collective, or even consensual ideological framework, expressing confidence, historical progress, and heroism. In contrast, contemporary memorials are marked by conflict, rupture, and loss, focused on individual memories and personal grievances, as well as generating political controversy. For Doss (2010), American memorials have become archives of public affect and repositories of public feelings and emotions, particularly grief, fear, gratitude, shame, and anger. Grief is the expression of emotional anguish, usually caused by death and loss. It is materialised in temporary memorials, including the roadside ones.

The growing phenomenon of spontaneously raised temporal memorials coincides with new developments in personalizing modern mourning. The 1982 Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC began the cultural change of public memorialization (Doss, 2010; Margry & Sanchez-Carretero, 2011). War memorials tended to be anonymous, but in this particular case the names of all the soldiers who died or disappeared during the war in Vietnam were inscribed into the Wall. It sent a message that "every dead human being is one too many" and undeserved death

could be partially compensated for by means of public memorialization (Margry & Sanchez-Carretero, 2011, p. 9). It is assumed that it generated a protest-related mourning practice. Soon, placing memorabilia in public spaces where traumatic deaths or events had taken place started to flourish in Australia, North America, and Europe. Besides personalization in modern mourning, the individualization process in Western cultures, observed since the second half of the 20th century, is considered to be responsible for both the sharp increase in the number of individuals who construct their own lives on personal goals and choices, and the increase in grassroots memorials (Margry & Sanchez-Carretero, 2011).

Polish roadside memorials are part of both, the global motoring heritage and memorial mania. Despite the fact that the number of fatalities has been systematically decreasing in Poland, in 2011 Poland held the shameful leading position among European Union countries in terms of the number of deaths (11,01) per 1 million inhabitants (OECD, 2023). Apart from roadside memorials, there are other memorials that have been raised on a massive scale all across the country in recent decades: those commemorating the victims of the communist regime, other ones symbolising 2000 years of Christianity (Przybylska, 2014) or honouring pope John Paul II (Klima, 2011), as well as wayside crosses, described in the following section.

Context of Polish society: wayside crosses and living cemetery traditions

In the author's opinion, both roadside memorial builders and caretakers are inspired by wayside crosses and living cemetery traditions in Poland. The origins of spontaneously erected, cross-shaped reminders of fatal accidents placed along Polish roads date back to the old Christian tradition of putting up crosses. As Christianity was spreading over Europe, crosses were not only commonly used in the liturgy but also started to filter into the secular spheres of life (Kobielus, 2011). From the 14th century onward, crosses marking the legal, public reconciliation of manslaughter and crosses commemorating fatal accidents or sudden death were erected along roads and at public sites (Margry & Sanchez-Carretero, 2011). The cross in the Polish landscape has been interpreted both as the expression of a historically rooted attachment to the Roman Catholic Church and religiosity itself (Casanova, 1994; Herbert, 2001). Poland follows the tradition of building "wayside structures", such as "shrines, crucifixes and crosses", which Park (1994, p. 200) calls "visible symbols of faith", forming "a roadside religious landscape". Since the Counter-Reformation in the 17th century, it has been a popular activity in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox Church, but rare in the areas dominated by Protestants.

Nowadays, in Poland, two kinds of crosses can be distinguished in the roadscape: those up to 3-4 metres tall and those about one metre tall. The latter type commemorate fatal road accidents. The former, together with wayside shrines dedicated to St. Mary or other saints, are perceived as a part of an old Polish folk tradition, a grand heritage and a symbol of the "religious, custom-related, integrating, presti-

gious, aesthetic and cultural needs of local communities” (Czerwińska, 2011, p. 151). Polish roadside landscape is dotted with a huge number of crosses. A small cross erected at the site of a fatal car crash is statistically observed every fourth kilometre along national roads (Przybylska, 2022). Taller wayside crosses, also numerous, can be encountered every seventh kilometre (Przybylska, 2014). Both types are either wooden or metal constructions (stone ones are rare), usually accompanied with candles and flowers. Wooden crosses are usually brown and metal ones are black.

In Polish, one term *krzyż przydrożny* is used for both: a wayside cross and a roadside cross. There is no distinction between a way and a road. In contrast, in English, crosses used to stand along what can be called a road as well as in the fields or woods, reached only by a pathway, and that is why the term “wayside” is justified. In the Polish language, the term *krzyże powypadkowe* (post-accident crosses) was introduced in order not to be confused about what kind of cross the speaker has in mind. However, the fact that there is one term for all the crosses standing along either ways or roads implies a close relationship between the two kinds of crosses. Still, the taller wayside crosses have been erected for a variety of reasons, e.g. thanksgiving, as an expression of repentance, commemorating an event in the parish, to protect from evil (Szot-Radziszewska, Radziszewska, 2019), while the smaller roadside crosses just mark a sudden death in a car crash.

It must be emphasised that over 90% of roadside memorials include a cross as the dominant structure. Moreover, some crosses put at the sites of fatal accidents copy typical elements of wayside crosses in the Polish landscape. Half of the roadside memorials are composed of crucifixes. Some of them include a small plaque, bearing Latin letters INRI (Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum), acronyms for Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews. The plaque has been traditionally placed on the cross above the head of Jesus, in memory of the biblical inscription commissioned by Pontius Pilate (Kobielus, 2011). Some crucifixes marking a fatal accident are accompanied with a rounded rooflet over the figure of Jesus. There are rays radiating from the intersection of the metal crosses’ beams, too. Roadside memorial builders follow the tradition of surrounding a wayside cross with a fence, although less frequently. In Poland, the abovementioned wayside structures seem to reflect the country’s denominational structure. As much as 93.7% of the population belong to the Roman Catholic Church (Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland 2018). Although slowly declining, religious practices are still vital among Catholics. In 2018, 38% of Poles used to go to church every Sunday, and 17% received the Holy Communion (Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego, 2020). In 1980, those statistics were 51% and 8%, respectively.

In Poland, cemeteries are well-maintained and often visited (Tanaś, 2008; Klima, 2011; Królikowska, 2012; Lewicka, 2017). For example, only 3.4% of the inhabitants of the Silesian city of Katowice do not visit the graves of their relatives, and 41.3% visit the cemetery also without any special occasion, apart from anniversaries or other holidays (Lewicka, 2017). The All Saints’ Day, a feast day in the Catholic calendar, is actually the time of the greatest migration of Poles in the whole year (Tanaś, 2008). On this day, the majority of Poles visit family graves, even if they have

to travel hundreds of kilometres. In the author's opinion, interviews conducted with roadside memorial builders and caretakers also confirm the important role of the cemetery in Polish society (Przybylska 2022). Half of the interviewees, without being asked about a cemetery, spontaneously talked about their frequent visits to family graves. In general, they preferred the cemetery as the main place of commemoration and the roadside memorial as a supplementary one. Moreover, the roadscape can be considered an extension of the cemetery and wayside crosses traditions. Firstly, both candles and flowers are reported to be the most popular objects left at roadside memorials (Przybylska, 2022) and cemeteries (Lewicka, 2017). According to the author's informal observation, they used to accompany wayside crosses, too. Secondly, the style and message of inscriptions at roadside memorials suggest that they are treated like inscriptions on gravestones at the cemetery (Przybylska et al., 2020). They both feature standardization, laconic reference to the sphere of transcendence, a small degree of individualization, and frequent lack of emotion in the textual information (Królikowska, 2012). Additionally, the inscriptions on roadside memorials have the same structure as the inscriptions on wayside crosses (Przybylska et al., 2020).

Individual context: religiosity and trauma

Fieldwork and interviews with memorial builders evidence religious issues present at roadside memorials in Poland (Przybylska & Flaga, 2019; Przybylska et al., 2020; Przybylska, 2021, 2022). As it was mentioned in the previous section, the cross is the main form of a roadside memorial in Poland. It should be emphasised that out of 156 roadside memorials, only 12 do not contain a cross as the main structure. Eight of them have other clearly religious elements, such as holy images or inscriptions with religious meaning, and only four (2.5%), featuring a flower or/and a candle, "can be considered as completely secular commemoration" (Przybylska, 2022, p. 103). It can be assumed that Polish authors of inscriptions, who always use plaques and never ascribe a text directly to the cross, show respect for the place of Jesus' death and indirectly ascribe religious meaning to that practice (Przybylska et al., 2020), in contrast to Texas (Everett, 2002; Owen, 2011; Bednar 2020) or Australia (Collins & Rhine, 2003; Clark, 2012; Welsh, 2017), where letters or numbers used to appear on crosses. What is more, the popular location of plaques, which in Poland are attached to the cross below the intersection of the beams of the cross, leaves or suggests space for the figure of Jesus. In general, religious messages were identified in almost 40% of the inscriptions. They indicated their authors' and/or the deceased's relationship with Catholicism.

The phenomenon of interweaving religious and cultural issues can be observed in interviews with the bereaved. All interviewees declared that they believed in God and some described themselves as strong believers. Occasionally, it was difficult for them to give an answer to the question of why it was actually the cross that was put at the crash site and not any other object, like candles or flowers. Religious motiva-

tion to mark the site of the fatal accident was articulated by a number of memorial builders. They referred to their own religiosity and cited the meaning of the symbol of the cross for Christians. Others tended to mix cultural and religious motifs. The cross at the place of a fatal accident was considered a natural reaction of a Christian, a part of the Polish, Catholic or/and Christian tradition of commemorating someone's death, more appropriate than other objects. The author concluded elsewhere that in the Polish context of millennium-long Christian traditions, the fact that some identify the cross as the default symbol for marking death suggests that Christianity has become essentialised as everyday 'culture' (Przybylska, 2021).

Once they have been put to display, roadside memorials generate rituals. The main holidays of the Roman Catholic Church, i.e. the All Saints' Day, Christmas, and Easter, are the most popular times for visiting roadside memorials. Leaving objects at roadside memorials certainly belongs to common rituals performed around the world (Everett, 2002; Collins & Rhine, 2003; Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Welsh, 2017). However, what makes the case of Poland unique is that the memorials did not include personal items, like cigarettes, clothes, beverages, food, or notes, except incidental toys, flags, and rosaries. The predominant conventional forms of commemoration, such as flowers and candles, lead to the conclusion that the preferred "modest" model of a roadside memorial is the result of incorporating living cemetery traditions, including the abovementioned features, such as standardization, emotionlessness and a small degree of individualization, into roadside memorialization.

Death on the road is a traumatic experience directly related to individually raised roadside memorials. The interviews revealed that the bereaved coped with trauma in a variety of ways (Przybylska, 2022). Firstly, erecting a cross at the roadside and recurrently visiting it as well as the grave at the cemetery played a significant role in their grieving process, providing them solace and comfort. Secondly, half of the interviewees, women only, found engagement in religious practices very helpful. They talked about pilgrimages, attendance at Holy Masses, prayers at homes and at the roadside. However, despite the presence of two roadside crosses which had been consecrated, there was no record of any other official Catholic rituals performed by the interviewees. Thirdly, some interviewees valued help offered by a psychologist, psychiatrist, priest or colleagues in the work environment. Fourthly, what heals the bereaved, is also the proverbial time. For example, a woman, now reconciled with her brother's death, recalled that in the past the ringing of the phone at the time of her brother's accident had revived her pain. Eventually, during one interview, a rationalisation of grief was noted. The age of those who died in an accident mattered a lot to a woman who had lost her father. She claimed that she was reconciled to her father's death because "he already had grown-up children", adding that "the worst thing is when such young people die". Summing up, the roadside memorial itself, supported by other "strategies", including religion-based ones, helps the bereaved to cope with the unexpected traumatic experience of the beloved suddenly lost in a car crash.

Discussion and conclusions

Based on desk research, fieldwork and interviews, a three dimensional model of roadside memorials' driving forces in Poland has been developed (Fig. 1). The model can be transferred into universal contexts of studying roadside memorials: 1) global, 2) regional, and 3) local. The place of death, often emphasised as a very important element of roadside memorials' component (Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Klaassens et al., 2009; Bednar, 2020), was not included in the model because the author of the paper was focused on major trends within the broader culture. The local and direct determinants were limited to an individual's ways of coping with trauma and the role of religiosity in the erection of a cross at the site of a fatal accident. Similarly, there is no communication or ritual element (Byrd, 2006; Klaassens et al., 2009) because the functions of roadside memorials were not the objects of interest in the paper. However, while in Byrd's (2006) model the emphasis on landscape is hidden, in my model, wayside crosses are perceived as both a traditional part of the Polish landscape and the distinctive element of the origins of roadside memorials in Poland. It seems that the role of traditional wayside structures present in countries of Christian heritage is insufficiently exploited in the world literature on roadside memorials.

For Bednar (2020), roadside memorials flourish in America due to the fact that cemeteries and funeral services are not sufficient to negotiate with both individual and collective road traumas. Similarly, Welsh (2017, p. 256) states that roadside memorials "fulfil needs that perhaps cemeteries no longer do in contemporary society, including Australia". In Poland, by contrast, living cemetery traditions are extended into roadscape. Both roadside crosses and cemeteries are well maintained and often visited. Cemeteries still effectively perform their commemorative function, including the memory of those who died tragically in road accidents. It is important to note here that the interviewees did not in any way point to the current world literature theme of objecting to contemporary cemetery restrictions with respect to officially approved memorialisation practices or insufficiency of traditional mourning rituals (Clark & Franzmann, 2006; Nešporová & Stahl, 2014; Welsh, 2017). What is more, the prevalence of crosses in roadside memorialisation in Poland is connected to the religiosity of the people erecting them. For some bereaved, the cross holds an important place in their Catholicism.

To conclude, roadside memorials in Poland follow not only two cultural models of memorialisation, deeply rooted in the society, i.e. a cemetery and a wayside cross, but they are a part of global contemporary memorial mania and contested motoring heritage. At the beginning of the process of roadside memorialisation, there is always the individual who has experienced a traumatic event. As mentioned in the introduction, crosses are often placed at the sites of fatal road accidents in countries of Christian heritage. However, the religious theme in the motivation to erect a cross at the place of a fatal accident makes Poland different from Western countries, where the symbolism of the cross is supposed to be linked to death, not religion (Clark & Cheshire, 2004; Clark & Franzmann, 2006). In Western Europe, North America and Australia, there are either religious roadside memorials related to Christianity or

secular commemorations usually composed of flowers and candles. Other religions are absent or very rare at the roadscape in this part of the world. For instance, Bednar (2020) found only one roadside memorial with a Jewish symbol. Considering the share of the crosses in roadside memorialisation, the case of Poland is similar to Australia and New Zealand (93%) and Romania (98%) (Clark & Franzmann 2006; Nešporová and Stahl 2014). It is different from Czechia (65%) and the Netherlands (17%) (Nešporová & Stahl 2014; Klaassens et al., 2009).

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