

Bulgarian Women Intellectuals in the Collective Memory (19th-21st Century)

Georgeta Nazarska

Associate Professor, Ph.D., Cultural Heritage Department,
State University of Library Studies and IT, Sofia

Doi:10.5901/ajis.2013.v2n11p48

Abstract

This paper is devoted to the collective memory during the 20-21th century of women intellectuals in Bulgaria, who had been active public figures until World War II. It studies the work of memory (its formation, inventing, and forgetting), depending on political conditions in the country and in comparison with Europe. Emphasis is put on absence of female educated elites in the Bulgarian collective memory and in national reputation elites. The paper studies through historical and anthropological approach the presences/absences of women intellectuals in "realms of memory" (Pierre Nora). The research is done basing on discourse analysis of memorial plaques, monuments, names of streets, and squares.

1. Commemorative Plaques

The register of the Sofia Municipality and a field work are sources of the research of memorial plaques in Sofia placed in honor of Bulgarian and foreign women with contribution to the Bulgarian history. A total of 40 of memorial plaques were detected and studied.

Plaques were placed irregularly in time and an enhanced public interest in this kind of activity has been observed in the last 10 years. The procedure accepted in the Regulations of the Sofia Municipality requires the submission of a proposal by a Steering Committee, documentary agreement by the owner of the building, support by a Municipal Councilor and a majority during voting by Sofia Municipal Council. Owing to this reason the placement of memorial plaques is at the initiative of relatives and more seldom of professional and public organizations, which undertake the expenditures for design, workmanship and assembly. The described mechanism explains why the placement of memorial plaques in Sofia shows a lack of vision for the historical heritage.

The content analysis of memorial plaques proves that women artists are most seriously represented (74%). This is reasonable by their close contact with the public and the strong popularity of the arts (fiction, music, dancing, theater and fine arts) among Bulgarian society. There are almost no plaques dedicated to political women activists or representatives of "traditional" for women professions, for instance teachers. The first „lack“ may be connected with the peculiar „purge“ after year 1989 of monuments and memorial plaques in all the big towns, but also with the fact that the collective memory by tradition does not preserve the image of women, dealing with occupations „not typical“ of them. The second „lack“ marks the disparaging of a great group of professions with apparent feminization during the totalitarian regime.

The bigger part (71%) of the memorial plaques are dedicated only to women and the remaining ones honor them together with their fathers, brothers, husbands or sons. This fact clearly indicates the place of women in the collective memory: as a part of the family and lineal history, and as supplement to the biographies of their relatives men – figures of significance in the Bulgarian past and in fact creators of history. It is not by chance that the women were not positioned in the inscriptions of the „joint“ plaques in the first place and this additionally marginalized them.

The analysis also outlines other particularities. Bulgarian, Jewish, Albanian and Czech women are encountered amongst the honored ones, all of them having worked for the Bulgarian culture and society. The representatives of the youngest generation and of the middle aged one, which resided in two epochs, have an advantage (76.9%), whilst the old generation is not the center of attention. Both women inconvenient to the totalitarian power and favorite ones of the communist regime are equally represented in the urban space. All this proves that the known from long ago mechanism of construction and de-construction, re-arrangement and mosaic of the collective memory is available in Sofia as well.

The memorial plaques of women in Sofia are few in number and constitute an unessential share of all the plaques in the city. It makes impression that there are no plaques, which reflect events of significance for the group of the women and for the women's movement.

Another characteristic feature of the plaques in memory of women is that they do not bear any meaningful and plentiful information about their object but rely on the knowledge of the society. Two thirds of them contain templates as

the „great/ renowned/ patriotic“, and the remaining ones do not indicate details about their activities, satisfying themselves with laconic indication of the profession. A line of interest is the use of the masculine gender („performing artist and pedagogue“), well outlining the framework, which the society perceives the professionally prominent women in. Finally the memorial plaques of women in Sofia do not make an exception from those remaining in the city with regard to their situation and preservation. There are a lot of examples of plaques made of unsuitable material (brass or cardboard), inscribed in a “non-communicative” language (lapidary and without any facts), ornamented with primitive iconography (as a rule, there are no bas-reliefs on them, with one or two exceptions), placed in non-representative places (amongst signboards, air conditioners and shop-windows), compromised by graffiti and damaged by inscriptions and cracks. There are examples of their disassembly by private owners because of repairs or negligence. The organization of solemn ceremonies and the placement of flowers in front of them as it is done in other cities throughout the world are extremely rare. The Sofia Municipality does not have any vision whatsoever and undertakes absolutely no measures for their maintenance, cleaning and protection.

The “non-existing” plaques could be commented on along with the existing ones. The collective memory of the city „misses” not only events but also personalities. The homes of quite a few of the public figures, whose relatives are distinguished by memorial signs, were not designated. There are no placed memorial plaques indicating the merits and reminding the place of nearly all the founders and leaders of the Bulgarian women’s movement. The homes and the workplaces of dozens of Bulgarian women teachers, scientists, medical doctors, engineers and architects were not designated. In principle the so called women’s places are not present in the current maps and in the tourist routes of the capital. This means not only absence of socialization of the cultural heritage, but also lack of any perspective for it. This is also a mark for serious “gaps” in the collective memory of the Bulgarian people about their cultural elites and about the place of women in them.

As a counterpoint of the stated hereinabove, some “good practices” in other Bulgarian cities may be indicated. The majority of the memorial plaques in the country are in honor of local women figures, who gave their contribution to the prosperity of the individual populated areas. They comprise a long time period (from the middle of the 19th to the end of the 20th centuries) and have as their subjects women with various occupations and professions: nuns, public figures from the period of the Bulgarian National Revival, teachers, community center activists, women of arts, medical doctors, revolutionaries, and their relatives. A particular activity in the placement of such memorial signs has been observed in the last 10 years, and the initiative for them has been undertaken by the reinstated women’s societies in places, by other NGOs and civil committees.

2. Graves and Tombstone Memorials

The practice of placing graves of famous people in the central urban area is with low prevalence in Bulgaria. There are three tombstone memorials of women in Sofia at present. The three of them were buried next to temples at their explicit requests. The grave of Queen Eleonore (1916) is in the courtyard of Boyana Church, saved personally by her from destruction years before that. The yard of benefactress Yordanka Filaretova (1915) is in the courtyard of Temple „Vseh Skorbyashchi Radost“, built up with her own funds. The feminist, teacher and public figure Ekaterina Karavelova was buried (1947) next to the temple of „Sv. Sedmochislenitsi“ (Saints Cyril and Methodius and Their Five Followers).

The share of women’s tombstones in the urban space of the city of Sofia is equal with that of men who deserved recognition. What is indicative, however, is the fact that these tombstones were not created at a public initiative and do not indicate honor to women with merits for the nation, but are heritage from past years.

The grave of Queen Eleonore is the most well-known to the public from the three graves, but it is the most difficult for access with view to its location at the end of the city. The graves of Filaretova and Karavelova are in communicative urban places, but they are not known to the citizens of Sofia. At present the socialization of the tombstones is too weak: they not only do not function as realms of memory for famous historical figures but are not realms of memory in a local plan, either, they are not present in the tourist routes of the city and are not designated on maps, atlases, leaflets and reference books.

The condition of the tombstones of famous women located in the Central Sofia Cemetery is even more alarming: they are hidden by vegetation, lots of their inscriptions were erased by time, ornaments and even complete gravestones were broken and so on. The absence of information about the most famous tombstones (in the form of a plan, a scheme, a leaflet, web site or others) and the total neglect of their maintenance by the Municipality and their relatives and friends result in at least three outcomes: „gap” in the collective memory, impossibility for their socialization and for their functioning as “realms of memory”.

If the situation in the capital is compared to that in the country, differences may be found out, which are not to the benefit of the big city. The grave of Gina Kuncheva, the mother of the Bulgarian national hero Vasil Levski, in Karlovo is very well preserved and maintained and is a subject of permanent visits on the part of tourists. The graves of Veneta Boteva and Ivanka Boteva, wife and daughter of the poet revolutionary Christo Botev, are preserved in Veliko Tarnovo and are maintained by local NGOs and by the Municipality itself, which has a program for cleaning, conservation and restoration of the tombstones. In 1976 the remains of the national heroine Rayna Knyaginya were moved from Sofia to her native settlement Panagyurishte, where they still are nowadays resting in peace in the courtyard of her father's home. A monument was built up there, in front of which annual celebrations of April Uprising (1876) are organized.

3. Names of Streets and Squares

The streets in Sofia started to have official names only after year 1878. Over time the main thoroughfares in the central city part were called by the names of eminent historical and political personalities: Medieval rulers, Bulgarian tsars and members of the Tsar's family, Russian figures who contributed to the Liberation, foreigners engaged with the Bulgarian cause. A big part of the streets received names related to landmark events or memorial sites. The names were transferred to the periphery districts from the central city part.

Naming urban spaces in Sofia after women during this time period followed the set up tendencies in general. After the death of Princesses Marie Louise (1899) and Clémentine (1907), and of Queen Eleonore (1916) main thoroughfares in the capital were named after them. In 1928 only 1.5% of the city spaces in Sofia had names of women. These were most of all monarchical persons, a teacher, a public woman and a revolutionary. No essential changes were made in the thirties of the 20th century. (Azbuhen 1928)

After 1944 a great number of names in memory of women participating in the communist resistance and political figures entered the toponymy of the city. Two boulevards had the names of women cognately related to the communist Leaders – the mother of Georgi Dimitrov and the daughter of Todor Zhivkov.

In 1989-1993 13 streets, 1 boulevard and 1 square changed their names as public reassessment of the merits of women partisans, the functionaries of the Communist Resistance and of the women's communist movement started. Sources from 2010-2011 indicate that 49 elements of Sofia urban space were named after women. (Ukazatel n.d.)

It makes impression that most of the streets named after women are located in the periphery areas of the city and only 1 boulevard and 1 square may be counted in the prestigious city center. This practice differs from the other Bulgarian towns. For instance in Bourgas one of the central squares was called Baba Ganka after Ganka Hadzhipetrova, a famous public figure and benefactress.

With one or two exceptions, the women after whom the city spaces were named belong to the educated elites. Most of all women intellectuals (55.1%) and political figures (40.8%) were honored, which completely coincides with the ratio of streets, named after men.

There are absolutely no women who were leaders of the women's movement amongst the women, whom city spaces were named after, but there are lots of women who broadly expressed themselves in the national liberation and in the communist movement. This means that the collective memory was arranged in the years after the Second World War and even the changes after year 1989 could not change it so that the feminist movement could occupy its well deserved place. It is too symptomatic that even in the sphere of the arts there is internal gradation, and a "confirmed" in the public attitudes women's professions (writing) prevails the spheres of music, theater and fine arts. (Sofia i region 2011)

In general the question who, how and why were selected to be patrons of the urban space do not have an unambiguous answer. Here the political situation, which they are offered in, has a share: the rejection of the totalitarian regime and the search of identification in the pre-communist time period introduce into use the names of the Princesses and of the Queens. A particularity of the post-totalitarian information medium is of significance as well. The public opinion is more and more formed on the grounds of the yellow press, which publishes sensational materials about the nearest past, inclusive of biography related ones. Within this meaning certain persons become „fashionable“ for the society with their real or seeming dissidence. The mechanism of naming spaces is of considerable importance. The procedure is similar to that of initiating the placement of memorial plaques. This results in extreme subjectivity in the selection; chance, incidence and intermittence of the process itself and most of all its deprivation of any historical grounds and criteria. The result is visible at present: eclecticism, questionable value of the selected personalities and total „absence“ of whole professional groups amongst women (architects, scientists, teachers and public figures connected with the women's movement).

4. Conclusion

Currently in Sofia urban space, but also in that of many cities in the country, female figures rarely present. If they exist, they are primarily related to the implementation of the national project, namely revolutionaries, relatives (mothers, wives, and daughters) of the National Revival Movement figures who distinguished themselves in the struggle for liberation and in the Communist resistance. Among the honored with a memorial "realms of memory" is a small number of women belonging to the educated elites and live and work from the Liberation to World War II. There are also tangible "absences": women related to politics, social activists and professional women outside art. Among the "realms of memory" dominate memorial plaques, but not the monuments (including burial) and tombs. The number and relative ratio is incomparable to that of the "noble" men and their importance in the collective memory of the nation.

References

- Azbuchen pokazalets na ulicite, bulevardite i ploshtadite v Sofia. In: Petrov, Al. (1928) *Plan na Sofia*. Sofia: Iv.Kasyrov, T.F.Chipev, pp. 15-35. [Index of Streets, Boulevards and Squares in Sofia. In: Petrov, Al.(1928) *Plan of the City*. Sofia: Iv.Kasarov and T.F.Chipev, pp. 15-35.]
- Sofia i region. Atlas (2011). Sofia: Domino. [Sofia and the Region. Atlas (2011). Sofia. Domino]
- Ukazatel na poshtenskite kodove za grad Sofia. Retrieved June 24, 2013, from http://www.bgpost.bg/files/custom/PostalCodes/Sofia_postal_2010.pdf [Directory Postcode for Sofia, Retrieved June 24, 2013, from http://www.bgpost.bg/files/custom/PostalCodes/Sofia_postal_2010.pdf]