

Odsłonić - this is how Maria Dabrowski (born to Polish parents in 1988 in the Netherlands) entitled her photo book, the book which is the result of Maria's search into her family's history, a search she embarked on at end of 2013 and continued until 2015. In the Polish language Odsłonić means to reveal, to expose. The word in its meaning "to open" is also used in relation to curtains, which Maria associates with various memories of her Mother. It is also interesting to observe that the French translation of the word, "révéler" - a term which feels rather sensitive to Maria, is also used in photography to convey the meaning of "appearing of a picture".

In this book Maria reveals to a certain extent the history of her family on her mother's side. The narrative is told not with words but with pictures and has its beginning in the personal need to fill in the empty spots and question marks in the family history.¹

The photographs are largely analogue pictures taken by the author herself. The photographs have been carefully chosen and then ordered, as if they fit in an untold story line, to create a visual narrative. What that story is or what it becomes to the viewer, can be different from what is it to the author.

The photographs in this book follow each other. They often trigger connotations of one another, they seem to be each other's repetitions or slightly different versions of one another. The photographs form a timeline on their own. A timeline that is not necessarily linear, that evokes not only the physical time, but also that of memories, time that can curl, and pause, and go back, and accelerate according to its own self-willed agenda.

The photos are mainly portraits, still life and landscapes. They have been taken indoors (for example, house interiors or the inside of a train), outdoors (for example, a dilapidated house or the facade of a building), but there is also the perspective of looking outside (for example, looking through a window, without the curtains in front of the lens).

The focus can be on a single element, on several seemingly irrelevant details or just the opposite, the pictures can show an open space, somewhere towards a horizon.

The viewer will often notice Maria Dabrowski's sensitivity to colour and light. The colours often become blurry or pale and the light gets soft and filtered, and that only strengthens the peace and the tranquility of the photographs.

Looking at the fine details in the landscapes or the interiors, the viewer can guess that these photographs were not only taken in the Netherlands or Belgium. And indeed, Maria Dabrowski travelled for the first time at the end of 2013 to the Western Ukraine to listen to her grandfather's stories about his childhood, which took her on a journey through his childhood house. She found the house in a state of dilapidation and met various members of her family she did not know she had.

In 2014 she went back to the Western Ukraine, this time accompanied by her mother, who also saw the long-lost family members for the first time and visited the home country of her father for the first time.

Maria also photographed her family in the Netherlands and worked with her grandfather in Poland (among others through a conversation they held at the end of 2014) until his death in 2015.

The photographs that were taken during this quest are not necessarily shown in a strictly chronological or logical order, as would be the case in a documentary.

Instead, they suggest rather than tell and they form a story as a whole. That story is mostly based on sensitive visual connotations and on restrained, or perhaps stifled emotions.

Nevertheless, the starting point for Maria Dabrowski is, substantially, a part of history: the history of Poland and the Soviet Union, the history of deportation and forced labour, migration and loss, pain and sorrow, life and death.

But this part from a "larger history" is seen and shown as family history: the history that has been lived, experienced and felt by three generations of the same family, her family. Namely by her grandfather, who, so to speak, is the main protagonist in the book; by her mother, indeed seen through the eyes of the daughter; and finally by herself, as she passively experiences everything, feels and observes, registers, looks and witnesses.

In 1939 Maria Dabrowski's grandfather, who was eight years old at that time, and his family were sent to Siberia for forced labour in the kolkhozes. Their house and land were taken by the Soviets. When after six years they were allowed to return, they had no rights to their possessions any more. Their documents were "devoured by the Soviets"².

A few years later, when her grandfather and his parents went to live in Western Poland, his father was arrested and battered by the communist regime due to "open political statements about Stalin"³. Eventually he ended up in a psychiatric institution. The cause of his death remains unknown.

Maria Dabrowski, being aware that it is impossible to approach big historical facts in an objective way, says she does not want to make any political statements.

She focuses on her and her family's story from the perspective of a certain feeling of injustice, suppression, sorrow and also anger⁴. She wants to zoom in on the unprocessed emotions within her family and she believes that certain (psychological) conditions can be passed on through generations. Nourished by the "painful silence of some of the family members"⁵ she set out on a search for "abstract translation of emotions"⁶.

The power of *Odślonie* lies perhaps in the fact that Maria Dabrowski makes the past present, without explicitly talking about it. Stemming from an autobiographic dimension, the book after all is not a single specific story, but it tries to touch upon universal themes.

And even though the photographs tell an individual story, each and one of us can fill in that story, using our own affinity with sensitivity to the visual and the evoked facts.

It is the extent to which it succeeds in that that the story becomes "real", it becomes a palpable, visual and emotional whole with a universal truth to it, and it becomes relevant to all of us, reaches beyond its personal family character and in a sense, beyond the author of the book.

As this story is unfortunately still, or should I say, more than ever, vividly present.

Marie-Pascale Gildemyn.
Brussels, September 2017

Notes:

The text is based on the conversations which the author held with Maria Dabrowski between October 2014 and 2017, as well as on the unpublished master thesis: *Maria Dabrowski: (Cultural) Identity (and) & (Family) Memory / Contemporary Art*, Brussels, LUCA - Sint-Lukas, Master Photography, 2014-2015.

¹ A quote from Maria Dabrowski's unpublished master thesis, Brussels, LUCA- Sint Lukas, 2014-2015.

² idem

³ idem

⁴ idem

⁵ idem

⁶ idem