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## Lager – literature – zones of silence

In the People's Republic of Poland, neither writers nor researchers had conducted a thorough debate regarding the “concentration camp reality”.<sup>1</sup> After 1989, no discussion has been held regarding the history of philosophy, and ethics-related issues emphasised in Lager literature. If some discussion occurred, it was incidental, as a side event of the release of new memoirs, collections of stories, and novels. It was usually raised by reviewers who focussed not so much on the questions posed by the nature of that type of writings, as on specific works.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to reconstruct the main areas within the map of Polish Lager prose – those avoided, inconvenient for the readers or the authors, or often both. I also intend to present the zones of silence resulting not only from the risk of violating a social taboo, but also from researchers' negligence.

### Terminological problems

In the title of my discussion, I referred to the ground breaking work by Arkadiusz Morawiec.<sup>3</sup> I referred to it because, e.g. Morawiec' study has become the main source of knowledge on the Lager theme in Polish literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. Thus, it serves as a natural point of reference.

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring to the category coined by Andrzej Werner (*Zwyczajna apokalipsa. Tadeusz Borowski i jego wizja świata obozów*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Warsaw 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Examples were offered by *Wycieczka: Auschwitz – Birkenau* and *Zmienna ogniskowa* by Andrzej Brycht. *Wycieczka Auschwitz – Birkenau* caused a considerable reaction. It was probably the most frequently commented upon work on camp experiences since the publication of Borowski's Auschwitz stories. Vide T. Drewnowski, “Prowokacje B.”, *Miesięcznik Literacki* 1966, issue 3; J.R. Krzyżanowski, “O pisarstwie A. B.”, *Kultura* (Paris) 1967, issue 3; W.J. Tkaczuk, “Inicjacja”, *Więź* 1967, issue 4. Its popularity was a result of, apart from its provocative tone, its film adaptation. The story was translated to, e.g. the French, Bulgarian, and Lithuanian (the case of Tomas Venclova).

<sup>3</sup> A. Morawiec, *Literatura w lagrze, lager w literaturze. Fakt – temat – metafora*, Łódź 2009.

I would also like to offer two clarifications regarding the categories indicated in the title of my discussion.

First of all, I focussed on the domestic prose regarding Nazi Lagers or camps. It constitutes a part of a much larger notion: camp literature, which also includes prose regarding Soviet gulags. Not only the volume of the texts regarding the Soviet Gulag system required me to limit the research focus. A debatable matter would be whether the Lager and gulag experiences could and should be compared. Putting any attempt at establishing which of the two systems was the cruellest (or claimed the most lives) aside, I cannot accept that those two experiences were comparable.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, I included the definition limitations introduced by Morawiec. They enclosed Lager literature within a group of works located in a Lager setting, and, sometimes, preceded with scenes of their characters' arrests, interrogations, and transport. Thus, the following remained outside the "camp theme":

the stage of the recently liberated Lager, camps for DPs, return home or the search for a new place to live (or the "journey" to another concentration camp: a gulag – often when Lagers were liberated by Soviet troops), "life outside the camp" often marked by the KZ-syndrome or, as it is commonly referred to today, trauma [...]. One could further supplement the list with the social dimension of the post-camp life: trials of wartime criminals, museums, memory, and disputes over memory.<sup>5</sup>

I shall stop for a moment to discuss the theme of the "recently liberated Lager". In "Przywitanie wolności" (from a collection entitled *W deszczu*), Stanisław Wygodzki thus presented that moment:

They both marched at the back of the broken column which did not stop anywhere anymore. The SS officers fled and the women were left alone in the freezing cold, in a snow-covered road, so they did not stop, they just wandered on. They were stunned by the disappearance of the guards. None of them could had predicted such a situation.<sup>6</sup>

"Przywitanie wolności" discussed the death marches. Does that topic belong to the history of Nazi KLs? Those who marched in those ended up in camps behind the front line, within the territory of the Third Reich. Two women in "Przywitanie wolności" constituted a part of the history of the Lager – through their mentality and physicality. They just discovered that the SS officers who escorted them were gone. At the same time Wygodzki's text, similarly to *Znajome okolice*

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<sup>4</sup> The complex relations between the criminal machine of Lagers and gulags with some indication of certain similarities were analysed by A. Besançon (*Przekleństwo wieku. O komunizmie, narodowym socjalizmie i jedyności Zagłady*, trans. J. Guze, Warsaw 2000). In Polish writings, one proponent of considering Nazism and communism (Lagers and gulags) as comparable and mutually referential systems was Andrzej J. Kamiński (*Koszmar niewolnictwa, Obozy koncentracyjne od 1896 do dziś. Analiza*, trans. H. Zarychta and the author, Warsaw 1990).

<sup>5</sup> A. Morawiec, *Literatura w lagrze, lager w literaturze*, p. 365.

<sup>6</sup> S. Wygodzki, "Przywitanie wolności" [in:] *W deszczu*, Warsaw 1962, p. 44.

(“On that day we were free”),<sup>7</sup> did not offer a proper presentation of the life of a Häftling. It described the reality outside the barbed wire.

The fact of considering Morawiec’s definition as an optimal view of the genre purity results in some minor doubts. For example, how one should approach “Dom” by Tadeusz Mikołajek?<sup>8</sup> Its story took place after WWII, but the Lager constituted its primary metaphor focussing its basic semantic dimension. Parable and myth were used by Włodzimierz Odojewski in a short story entitled “Syzyf, czyli bliski bogom”. Its story took place in a KL, though it was used rather as a context for the parable than as evidence of a specific place in the world.<sup>9</sup>

Both “Dom” and “Syzyf, czyli bliski bogom” posed the question whether is it acceptable to consider as Lager literature works which not only do not fit the poetics of realism but also break the story away from a specific biography transferring it onto the area of artistically expanded intellectual metaphor. The task of reporting on what Nazi camps were moves from the poetics of a documentary to the area of the universal metaphor. Similar questions were posed in *Eden* by Stanisław Lem, where a KL built on an alien planet referred to Janowska concentration camp near Lviv.<sup>10</sup>

Morawiec’s purist approach enabled the elimination of unfounded attempts at classifying as camp matters publications stemming from other regions of wartime experiences.<sup>11</sup> Morawiec classified *Wycieczka Auschwitz-Birkenau* by Andrzej Brycht as post-camp prose. In *Ucieczka z Himmelkommando* by Gerard Górnicki – just like in the case of Brycht’s work – the story unfolded not during WWII but after it ended. The main protagonist was supposed to perform on stage a fragment of his own biography – which depicted his interment in Auschwitz.<sup>12</sup> At the same, the researcher’s rigorous approach led to the removal from the discussion some inconvenient facts from Lager history (e.g. rapes of women returning home from DP centres). It also excluded such a significant issue as the post-camp syndrome. It was often articulated in stories of the world after the liberation. A short novel by Kalman Segal entitled *Skojarzeni* depicted the fortunes of five protagonists whose lives were dominated by trauma, and memories of what they had experienced as young people interned in the Lager. The memories of the protagonist of a story by Józef Ratajczak entitled “Cień traw, cień drzew” were triggered by the image of spruces and grass overgrowing the area of the former scene of the crime. Even

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> T. Mikołajek, “Dom” [in:] *ibid.*, *Ślepe gwiazdy*, Wrocław 1976.

<sup>9</sup> W. Odojewski, “Syzyf, czyli bliski bogom” [in:] *ibid.*, *Kwarantanna*, Warsaw 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Vide A. Gajewska, “Zagłada w kosmosie” [in:] *Zagłada i gwiazdy. Przeszłość w prozie Stanisława Lema*, Poznań 2016, pp. 165–214.

<sup>11</sup> One example of unwarranted extension and, at the same time, mixing or attenuating the meaning scopes of the notion of camp literature was a book: M. Ostrowski *Literatura obozowa w jej funkcji „oral history” a propaganda PRL*, Łódź 2013. Its author included within the area of Lager literature texts belonging to wartime or occupation experience.

<sup>12</sup> G. Górnicki, “Ucieczka z Himmelkommando”, [in:] *ibid.*, *Portret kota*, Poznań 1961.

though the story unfolded in contemporary times, and the camp events were presented from some temporal perspective, it was them that constituted the semantic centre of the text, its core. That landscape was used towards one end only: to evoke scenes from the past:

Now [...] grass looked like hands twisted as if rusted wire, the meadow brought to mind a sea full of dead bodies that float under the surface awaiting rescue and even flowers usually considered as a synonym of innocence, of natural beauty had in them something of irises, hazy and murky, being crushed like glass spread over the path.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, is “Cień traw, cień drzew” part of Lager literature?

Morawiec’ erudite discussion omitted works which clearly belonged to Lager prose. I mentioned that not to diminish the reading and the competences of the researcher in any way, but to supplement his work. Mieczysław Frenkel’s collection entitled *To jest morderstwo* includes two short stories (“Dialog o muzykach” and “Stosy płoną”) regarding the Janowska concentration camp. Surely “Błogosławiona chwila”, “Śmiejące się dziewczęta”, “I co ty teraz wymyślisz, Kon?” by Jan Kurczab (from the *Wojna nie zabija matek* collection), “Na Majdanku” by Helena Boguszewska (*Nigdy nie zapomnę*), “Sędziów trzystu czterdziestu dziewięciu” by Janusz Krasieński (*Jakie wielkie słońce*), “Półkożuszek z Teresina” by Jan Maria Gisges (*Brudne śniegi*) belong to lager literature.

### Zones of silence

When considering the features of contemporary studies of Shoah writings, Aleksandra Ubertowska concluded:

The area can be discussed using the centre-fringes opposition marking the stress between the mainstream literary awareness (positively valued genres, stylistic moods, as well as hidden mechanisms of reception in the circle of the Holocaust literature) and marginalised phenomena or even phenomena absent in the aesthetic or literary science studies.<sup>14</sup>

The restoration of the *fringes* has been done not only in literary and literary science studies. As Paul Connerton remarked several years ago: “a generation of mainly socialist historians have seen in the practice of oral history the possibility of rescuing from silence the history of culture of subordinate groups”.<sup>15</sup> It has been a clearly visible tendency of the past few years.

<sup>13</sup> J. Ratajczak, “Cień trawa, cień drzew” [in:] *ibid.*, *Trawa. Opowiadania*, Poznań 1971, p. 168.

<sup>14</sup> A. Ubertowska, “Wstęp. Holocaust – marginesy dyskursu. Auto(tanto)grafie” [in:] *ibid.*, *Holokaust. Auto(tanto)grafie*, Warsaw 2014, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> P. Connerton, “Pamięć społeczna” [in:] *ibid.*, *Jak społeczeństwa pamiętają*, trans. M. Napiórkowski, Warsaw 2012, p. 59. [English version as in: Connerton Paul, *How Societies Remember: Themes in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989.]

What do I understand as the “zones of silence”? They consist two types of reticence. The first group is associated with the fear of violating the taboo. The other is a set associated with research blank spots and oversights. A violation occurs through verbalisation of what should remain non-verbalised, which has been banned. The violation of the ban leads to breaking the applicable patterns of talking about Auschwitz, i.e. the set of social expectations or political demand (those two layers would sometimes meet).

The other zone of silence is associated with the violation of reading habits and the aesthetic choices made by the author. Camp writings appear more sensitive to the application of stylistic devices than others. The visions of Auschwitz conventionalised in literary terms become the goal. Thus, the issue of appropriateness deserving a separate study unfolds. I do not intend to delve deeper in those regions in which it is easy to stumble upon various aporias. If I talk about appropriateness, it shall always be from the perspective of the receiver and the historically significant limits of what we consider aesthetically appropriate (acceptable).

Readers, especially in the initial post-WWII years, viewed Lager writings using the testimony perspective. It was supposed to guarantee that the truth about Auschwitz will not be adulterated. Anything that interfered with the documentary poetics and reading was, on the one hand, a sign of excessive mannerism and, on the other, a violation of ethical principles as it questioned the unwritten veracity pact between the reader and the author. By using irony and grotesque Borowski was the first to undermine the notion of a simple, mirror-like reflection as the only appropriate manner for discussing camp reality.

### **The origins (1) – the pressure of worldview and aesthetics**

Thematic and stylistic suppressions have twofold origins in camp narratives. Some were a result of their inexpressibility, others of intentional avoidance of sensitive issues of camp reality. I shall first focus on the former. The helplessness of the witness could had been a result of the language’s insufficiency. When discussing early attempts to commemorate the tragedy of Nazi Lagers right after WWII, Zofia Wóycicka concluded:

When analysing memorial projects from that period, one can observe [...] a progressing tabooisation of Shoah [...]. Some of the discussed [...] controversies did not fall [...] along the division line into “remembrance groups” or political movements, rather the expression of a broader crisis the European culture suffered due to WWII experiences – experiences for which the traditional array of forms and symbols lacked adequate means of expression.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Z. Wóycicka, *Przerwana żaloba. Polskie spory wokół pamięci nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych i zagłady 1944–1950*, Warsaw 2009, p. 275.

It was also significant what kind of experiences, knowledge, and religious or political convictions a given Auschwitz internee possessed. The previous worldview of an author who was sent to the camp (who often fulfilled the role of a direct witness) influenced the perception and understanding of the Lager. Zofia Kossak's case was an almost model example of an "adulteration" resulting from a combination of the conditions of camp existence<sup>17</sup> and the pressure of her religious views "brought" into the Lager. Both factors prevented the author from noticing that what Tadeusz Borowski, her opponent, saw. Maria Janion developed an in-depth reconstruction of the worldview of the author of *Pożoga*, and its results for the perception of Auschwitz, which included numerous "suppressions". The researcher concluded: "Kossak-Szczucka often described the experiences of a female Birkenau internee through suppressions and half-truths. When looking at the smoke coming from the crematories, she remained a Polish nationalist full of faith in divine providence, and the superiority of the national-Catholic union among Poles".<sup>18</sup>

Kossak remained hostage to religious sanctimony and visions of Poland, its position and role in Europe, in the world, as well as slogans regarding the role and the place of other nations (e.g. Jews).<sup>19</sup> She perceived Auschwitz through that. However, can the author of *Pożoga* be accused of lying? To offer a positive response one would have to assume she forged the truth about the camp. There is very little evidence to support such a claim.

A different situation applied to the texts of Jerzy Andrzejewski (*Apel*) and Wojciech Żukrowski (*Kantata*), to name but a few writers ideologically close to Kossak or Tadeusz Hołuj (*Koniec naszego świata*), to name a representative of the opposite approach – a communist activist. Hołuj's work was a case of a projection of the perfect state. It was conducted based on the writer's sufficient knowledge, which proved the fact of intentional distortions (I shall leave aside the goals of similar activities). Though I agree with Dariusz Kulesza that Żukrowski and Andrzejewski focussed on myth-building, I cannot agree to including Kossak in that group.<sup>20</sup> She did conduct myth-building, yet its origins were different. Kossak operated in the role of a witness, while Żukrowski and Andrzejewski knew Auschwitz only indirectly, from other people's accounts. That put Kossak in a different position, of someone who drew her knowledge on the world from direct

<sup>17</sup> Kossak spent a considerable portion of her several-month-long internment at Auschwitz in the camp hospital. The writer's internment in the Lager was discussed in detail by D. Kulesza (*Dwie prawdy. Zofia Kossak i Tadeusz Borowski wobec obrazu wojny w polskiej prozie lat 1944–1948*, Białystok 2006, pp. 23–25).

<sup>18</sup> M. Janion, "Zagadka Zofii Kossak-Szczuckiej" [in:] *Porzucić etyczną arogancję. Ku reinterpretacji podstawowych pojęć humanistyki w świetle wydarzenia Szosa*, B. Polak, T. Polak (eds.), Poznań 2011, p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> Vide C. Tonini, *Czas nienawiści i czas troski. Zofia Kossak-Szczucka – antysemitka, która ratowała Żydów*, trans. T. and W. Jekiel, Warsaw 2007. [Translated from Polish into English]

<sup>20</sup> D. Kulesza, *Dwie prawdy*, p. 228.



experience. The verification of the truth about Auschwitz entails undermining the truth of memories and experiences. In Żukrowski's and Andrzejewski's works, it was related to the fact of questionable indirect information, not externalised to such an extent as in the case of Kossak. The author of *Z otchłani* wanted to match what she had known about the world with what she saw. Żukrowski and Andrzejewski acted similarly: they adjusted what they learnt about the reality behind the barbed wire against their own visions of the world. The worldview focus is not insignificant not only for a direct witness, but also for a writer. Neither can it be omitted in the case of a researcher.

Unlike Janion and Kulesza, I approached the category of a lie more cautiously. Kulesza summarised Borowski's stance in the following manner: "there was one reason behind his protest: Polish camp prose lied. [...] It lied by escaping camp reality and hiding in literary drama (Andrzejewski) or homespun national-catholic myth (of Sarmatia and Uhlans) (Żukrowski)".<sup>21</sup> It would be difficult to question such a statement, and Kulesza was the only one to voice such an opinion. However, the notion of a *lie* should be considered in quotation marks. Those, I think, were also intended by Kulesza. Borowski developed the sharpest mind construct, in which he managed to capture the "truth" about Auschwitz. It was by no accident, then, that Werner entitled the central chapter of *Zwyczajna apokalipsa* "Fenomenologia obozu".<sup>22</sup> The image of Auschwitz in *Pożegnanie z Marią* was not all-encompassing, in that it did not offer a collection of the possible attitudes towards camp reality. The perspective of Tadek the Vorarbeiter was not the only key to the camp world, but one which enabled the most extensive understanding of it. The essence of Kossak's, Andrzejewski's, Morcinek's, and Żukrowski's "lie" was the fact that they (indirectly) assigned the images of Auschwitz they proposed the status of binding or sometimes even the only view. Borowski's vision also had some all-encompassing aspects, in the sense that it constituted a whole resistant to any other ideas or visions regarding Auschwitz. While Borowski diagnosed what he, almost prophetically, considered would soon be excluded from camp accounts, what he considered as a strategy to blur the image of a Nazi Lager, Kossak, Żukrowski, and Andrzejewski not only used a small temporal and spatial fragment to authoritatively state on the whole, but they also failed to notice that which transcended the dominant idea of what Auschwitz was, which soon expanded the zones of silence.

It is clearly visible that if juxtaposed, Borowski's mode of thinking about Lagers is triumphant today over the approach proposed by Kossak. Yet the issue is not only to confirm the literary quality after all the years. The issue at hand is the intellectual appropriation which occurred through Auschwitz stories. At least in the mid-1950s, starting with *pokolenie „Współczesności“* (generation '56), the

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 214–215.

<sup>22</sup> A. Werner, "Fenomenologia obozu" [in:] *ibid.*, *Zwyczajna apokalipsa. Tadeusz Borowski i jego wizja świata obozów*, Warsaw 1981.

vision of Auschwitz in Borowski's works received increasing recognition. It gradually led to a situation in which the images presented in "Proszę państwa do gazu", "Ludzie, którzy szli", "Dzień na Harmenzach" and "U nas, w Auschwitzu..." became paradigmatic in nature. Borowski's essential story, first of all, constituted a point of reference for other authors. Marian Pankowski was aware of that when he published *Z Auszvicu do Beslen*.<sup>23</sup> The suggestive concept of the world behind barbed wire in *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu* and *Pożegnanie z Marią* – which did not allow any space for metaphysics or religion or any activities of the resistance – made the readers distrustful towards those accounts for which such components of the camp experience were important. Religious life, altruistic sentiment, art – parodied, questioned or completely ousted by Borowski – seemed artificial, almost unreal. That was because the darker the presented image of Auschwitz, the more it was reliable. I would also like to add after Morawiec that the better the text which thus formulated the image of a Lager.<sup>24</sup> That cannot be found in Borowski's stories, has to possess additional justification, prove its veracity. It was the author of *Pożegnanie z Marią* who defined the area of what should be discussed and how. That is absent from Auschwitz stories seems objectively absent – non-existent in Auschwitz reality. Thus, Borowski established relations between that which ought to be expressed (being significant) and what ought to be omitted (being insignificant). It is such a convincing and suggestive vision that the reader is ready to consider it as the only true one. Therefore, if during the initial years after WWII it was for many a suppressed inconvenient truth, for some time now it has defined mainstream approach to Nazi camps.

The basic matters differentiating the approach to Auschwitz should also include the question what was the system that created the network of Nazi KLs in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe? What were its origins? That issue directed my attention towards the relations between Nazism and the western culture.

Marxism and Catholicism, though for different reasons, both placed fascism outside European heritage considering it as a manifestation of barbarity unknown to the spirit of the West.

The author of "Proszę państwa do gazu" saw Nazism in relation to the western culture as a product of the latter's mechanisms, which elevated art and civilizational development on the basis of the suffering of individuals and entire communities.

The introduction of the assumption of the *sickness* or continuity carried specified cognitive consequences, and influenced the possibilities and methods of

<sup>23</sup> "The realisation that whatever and however he would write about his internment behind the gates of Auschwitz [...], it would be viewed through the prism of Borowski's stories, could had prevented [Pankowski] from writing anything for a long time". P. Krupiński, *Ciało, historia, kultura. Pisarstwo Mariana Pankowskiego i Leo Lipskiego wobec tabu*, Szczecin 2011, p. 104.

<sup>24</sup> Vide A. Morawiec, *Literatura w lagrze, lager w literaturze*, p. 160.



exploring the Lager. The scope of what was automatically excluded from study (discussion) was, in that approach, considerable. Thus, the zone of silence had well-defined borders, and their durability was guaranteed by the concepts of the philosophy of history, which resulted in the removal of the Nazi genocide outside the western traditions.

### The origins (2) – (political) ban on expression

Political and historical contexts seem significant in analysing the reasons for the suppressions in memoirs and literary works raising the topic of Lagers. The reading of Lager literature outside of them, however possible and existent in the interpretative practices, leads to its semantic impoverishment. Those are a special type of works in which what is important are the facts in the biography of the author, and the awareness of the receiver defined by a given epoch. The camp theme in the People's Republic was from the very beginning predestined to become an object of intentional distortion by the authorities, an instrument, exceptionally tempting and effective, for shaping the social beliefs on the past. By using it, communists not only shaped the desired way of thinking about what had happened, but also the applicable emotions. They used them for their own purposes: amplify some, and diminish others, unfavourable for them or those offering a potential source of criticism.

Even though the influence of ideological factors was considerable, one cannot agree with the authoritative statement by Marek Ostrowski: "Camp literature was written and published in accordance with the ideological demand of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR)".<sup>25</sup> Leaving the Stalinist period aside, one could easily find in the latter half of the 1950s and in the following decades texts which could not be associated with the party's vision of camp experiences (e.g. *Pięć lat kacetu* by Stanisław Grzesiuk). Belles lettres, then, (e.g. *Wózek* by Krasieński and *Wakacje Hioba* by Wojdowski) were anything but close to the guidelines of communist dignitaries, but also often against the common social beliefs regarding camp reality.

The extent of the influence of party factors on the shape of Auschwitz accounts is today only to some degree traceable.<sup>26</sup> As much as it is possible based on the materials held at GUKPPiW archives. Just like in the case of other types of writings, self-censorship mechanisms prove to be the most difficult to identify.<sup>27</sup> Today, it is usually impossible to recreate what was omitted through them. However, Ostrowski's conclusion was an example of an unjustified generalisation:

<sup>25</sup> M. Ostrowski, *Literatura obozowa w jej funkcji „oral history”*..., p. 143.

<sup>26</sup> Yet it seems only prudent to agree with Ostrowski when he discussed the numerous interventions (e.g. through delaying printing) in publications which bore documentary or scientific characteristics. Vide M. Ostrowski, *Literatura obozowa w jej funkcji „oral history”*..., pp. 195–198.

<sup>27</sup> Vide K. Budrowska, *Literatura i pisarze wobec cenzury PRL 1948–1958*, Białystok, 2009.

“The principle function of camp literature was to «preserve» the system, maintain its basic ideological values”.<sup>28</sup> The task, though momentous, constituted just a fraction of the relevant reason for creating writings on Nazi KLs: the irresistible desire to bear witness on the horrors of the Nazi world.

In the case of the influence of communist ideology on the truth about Auschwitz, it existed mainly in one area: the image of the Holocaust. In the schools of the PRL, any more extensive references to Shoah were consistently avoided. That applied to the experiences and the manner of commemorating Nazi Lagers.<sup>29</sup> For a long time Auschwitz “was perceived in Poland more as a concentration camp than a death camp, more as a place of genocide than of the extermination of Jews, not to mention the extermination of Gypsies”.<sup>30</sup> The dominant approach was the state-national generalising perspective which blurred the scale of the suffering of Jews.<sup>31</sup> Their fate became a part of the crimes committed against other European nations.

One cannot deny the fact that Auschwitz was a significant component of the historical policy of the state, and that it constituted its sensitive and key element, however, one neither can treat the *silence* surrounding the Holocaust as just a result of the propaganda efforts of the authorities. The suffering of Poles (its extent) obscured that of others, and prevented people from noticing them. Additionally, the intensification of the extermination operations aimed at Jews occurred quite late (in the summer of 1944 when transports from Hungary were arriving), and lasted for a short time (approx. six weeks), which also prevented any stronger consolidation in the memories of the witnesses and the society as a whole.<sup>32</sup>

### The victim – involuntary distortions

Primo Levi in *Pogrążeni i ocaleni (The Drowned and the Saved)* warned against accepting the accounts of the witnesses blindly. That is not easy for two reasons at least. First of all, it is sometimes the case that one does not possess

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>29</sup> The situation of prose was different. The exceptional nature of the fate of Jews was recorded in various ways. Stories, short stories, and novels included a sufficiently high number of passages depicting the suffering of the Jewish nation. It was raised very often, and with intensity unknown to other European literatures. Polish prose also from the start (i.e. since the publications of *Z otchłani* by Zofia Kossak and *Dymy nad Birkenau* by Seweryna Szmaglewska) reflected the depths of the pain and debasement of Jews in Auschwitz.

<sup>30</sup> M. Kucia, *Auschwitz jako fakt społeczny. Historia, współczesność i świadomość społeczna KL Auschwitz w Polsce*, Kraków 2005, p. 121.

<sup>31</sup> Marek Kucia concluded: “The national-state approach was mainly reflected in the name of the «International Monument», which indicated its origins, and the function of commemorating the victims of the camp – people who originated from various countries”. (ibid., p. 194).

<sup>32</sup> Kucia identified those and several other factors. Vide ibid., pp. 266–267.

sufficient number of accounts to be able to juxtapose them.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, the special position of the victim is the reason why one approaches her/his message on preferential terms, since its possible distortions are evaluated differently. The fact of assuming the point of view of the victim in an empathetic act of identifying with her/his fate makes it impossible to maintain a critical approach towards the original source. Christopher Browning wrote: “[The] survivors have been transformed into «messengers from another world» who alone, it is claimed, can communicate the incommunicable about an ineffable experience”.<sup>34</sup> The American historian, referring to the case of Benjamin Wilkomirski, concluded: “Two public debacles have demonstrated the pitfalls concerning the use of survivor testimony when the emotional desire to believe has been allowed to eclipse the critical approach that should apply to any historical source”.<sup>35</sup>

In the circumstances they found themselves, the internees “rarely could grasp the view of their whole world”.<sup>36</sup> Through numerous factors they usually could perceive only a fragment of the camp universe. That was a result of, e.g. the witness’s cognitive capabilities. One of the most obvious circumstances was the place occupied by an internee in the KL hierarchy. A different position in the lager machine, a different status of the Häftling (from a prominent person to the Muselmann), different durations of the interment at various stages of the operation of the KL.

At a distance of years one can today definitely affirm that the history of the Lagers has been written almost exclusively by those who, like myself, never fathomed them to the bottom. Those who did so did not return, or their capacity for observation was paralysed by suffering and incomprehension.<sup>37</sup>

Prominent persons were in a better situation. Owing to their position on the Lager ladder, they had a broader view: access to information, and the ability to observe and access a wider area. But their situation also included limitations. As Levi argued: “it was to a greater or lesser degree also falsified by the privilege itself”.<sup>38</sup> In that group of victims, the cognitive situation of the functionary internees was also different. According to Levi: “for obvious reasons,” they “did not bear witness at all [...] or left incomplete, distorted or totally false testimony”.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Vide Ch. R. Browning, *Pamięć przetrwania. Nazistowski obóz pracy oczami więźniów*, trans. H. Postuła-Lewicka, Wołowiec 2013, p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> P. Levi, *Pogrążeni i ocaleni*, p. 14. [All quoted English fragments as in: Levi Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*. Abacus: London 1989.]

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

But even those who occupied lower positions in the hierarchy did not serve the Auschwitz staff directly; they preferred to think about the initial period of their interment rather than about the prominent times. “Maybe because only the [latter] can be easily included in the (stereo-)typical story of the saved, who from start to finish, in every situation, remained unequivocally in her/his role of the victim”.<sup>40</sup> The figure of a victim is fundamental in the process of self-identification of an internee as well as in the process of modelling the truth about Lagers. One ought to consider the stories of those liberated from the camps through its context. Their “voice amongst the voices of other saved [is] muffled considerably”. If their accounts “are not really fit for constructing the collective memory of former internees”,<sup>41</sup> it was the case because they did not meet the pattern of a Häftling who was defenceless, humiliated, and stigmatised by the oppressor. That opens yet another undiscovered area, shamefully ousted from the recollections of the oppressed as something worse, inappropriate, and non-martyrised. “However, the task of coping with the experience of being released from a KL was the hardest for those who could not explain it either in terms of the absurdity or rationality of the Nazi decision”.<sup>42</sup> For those who had some influence on their release. It was an area marked by a sense of guilt. That was the issue which prevented them from boldly entering the elevating circle of the victims.

One of the main variables which modified the view of camp reality was an internee’s “seniority”. “Old numbers”, “fresh numbers”, and Zugangs (newcomers) all viewed the place of their ordeal differently. Those with the longest time spent in internment were (are) treated by their co-internees as experts, and their accounts and judgements as more reliable than other.

The camp was viewed differently by a Häftling and by a “normal” internee. Filipkowski discussed the issue using an example:

The very moment of their arrest was rarely present in the stories of those “normal” interviewees so expressively as in the case of those more “heroic” or “patriotic” stories of conspirators who got caught in action or who got denounced.<sup>43</sup>

Internees arrested during random roundups or during failed attempts at escaping compulsory work did not (have not) offered neither written nor oral accounts. They have kept silent.

Who, then, had the opportunity to create the most reliable (i.e. multi-faceted) descriptions of a Lager? Political internees, those who possessed appropriate cultural background,

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<sup>40</sup> P. Filipkowski, *Historia mówiona i wojna. Doświadczenie obozu koncentracyjnego w perspektywie narracji biograficznych*, Wrocław 2010, p. 108.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

who had the ability and luck to attain a privileged observatory without bowing to compromises, and the skill to tell what they saw, suffered and did with the humility of a good chronicler, taking into account the complexity of the Lager phenomenon and the variety of human destinies being played out in it.<sup>44</sup>

A combination of the two factors proved necessary: the appropriate, enabling ersatz independence and freedom, position within the camp structure, and the ability to perceive various dimensions, with a distance and openness to other narratives so to speak. Those components had to go hand in hand with the ability to intellectually grasp that what the person experienced.

### The victim – involuntary distortions

Upon reading *Pogrążeni i ocaleni* by Primo Levi one begins to have reservations towards the objectivity of the autobiographical stories on KL Auschwitz. That is because there exist various psychological stimuli influencing the description of that experience.

Tomasz Łysak – referring to an article entitled “Professionalizing Survival: The Politics of Public Memory among Holocaust Survivor-Educators in Montreal” by Anna Sheftel and Stancey Zembrzycki – argued:

Some of the saved are closer [...] to “professional witnesses” regularly giving public speeches on the basis of previously prepared scripts. They shape their stories using consciously selected rhetoric devices. They do not feel that such interventions alter the truth about their experiences or distort the memory process.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, a palimpsest is formed in which facts known from media coverage overlay the facts processed through personal camp experiences. Filipowski thus concluded the phenomenon of recollections reconstructed after several years:

Stories start resembling each other also because they were developed in the same culture of memory and commemoration, their authors belong to a community of former Polish political internees of concentration camps, their stories often include in the background a generalised historical story of KLs, and that they refer to and model themselves on one another. Each autobiographical story recalls not only the individual experience of its author, but also the stories and events of other important (for that group of internees) events from the history of the camp or from history in general. Only by identifying those social contexts, and making one’s way through their thick, one can approach individual experiences. And by individual [...] I do not mean “raw” – they cannot be that, e.g. because they had been announced, expressed in a language. Those “raw” ones remain unexpressed.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> P. Levi, *Pogrążeni i ocaleni*, p. 16.

<sup>45</sup> T. Łysak, “Formatowanie świadectwa” [in:] *ibid.*, *Od kroniki do filmu postraumatycznego – filmy dokumentalne o Zagładzie*, Warsaw 2016, p. 140.

<sup>46</sup> P. Filipkowski, *Historia mówiona i wojna*, p. 75.

Memory is subject not only to external pressure. It is mainly shaped by the consciousness of the saved. As Levi stated, it is marked by an incurable offence. They not only gnaw the oppressor (or at least we want to believe it is so), but also “den[ies] peace to the tormented”. Inside it

all or almost all factors that can obliterate or deform the mnemonic record are at work. The memory of a trauma suffered or inflicted is itself traumatic because recalling it is painful or at least disturbing: a person who was wounded tends to block out the memory so as not to renew the pain; the person who has inflicted the wound pushes the memory deep down, to be rid of it, to alleviate the feeling of guilt.<sup>47</sup>

One cannot omit the trite psychological knowledge of contemporary times when considering the area of that which is expressed and unexpressed, the expressible and inexpressible.

Another well-known mechanism was also significant for consolidating the simplifying view of Lager experiences. “[...] but it is also true that a memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallised, perfected, adorned, which installs itself in the place of the raw memory and grows at its expense”.<sup>48</sup> Has a similar phenomenon not occurred in the act of written recording of recollections? It seems that there existed a *sui generis* doubling. The author was exposed to the presented distortion of her/his own recollections, and subject to the influence (the scale of which is difficult to define) of what she/he had heard from others and what she/he had already read about lagers. It either supported and strengthened her/his visions of what had happened, or it required opposition and counter-narrative. The latter, in turn, could seem as a coherent rival whole, selective in relation to the world behind the barbed wire.

The intricacies of the shaping of the memory of the Event<sup>49</sup> were traced in minute detail by Lawrence Langer, a son of Shoah survivors. His *Świadectwa Zagłady w rumowisku pamięci (Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory)* constituted a study of the concealment and extraction of the ambivalent character of memory.<sup>50</sup>

Langer concentrated on oral accounts, which were full of cracks, interrupted fragments, and moments of suspending one’s voice. When he asked about the reasons, he discovered two types of memory, each of which had different intentions. The goal of regular memory is to incorporate tragic experiences into life, assign them “pretences of continuity”.<sup>51</sup> It subjects experiences to verbalisation or ration-

<sup>47</sup> P. Levi, *Pogrążeni i ocaleni*, p. 22.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> I used the term after Katarzyna Bojarska. Vide K. Bojarska, *Wydarzenia po Wydarzeniu. Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman*, Warsaw 2012.

<sup>50</sup> L. L. Langer, *Świadectwa Zagłady w rumowisku pamięci*, trans. M. Szuster, Warsaw 2015. [Quoted fragments of the author translated from Polish into English.]

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.



alisation attempts. It leads to “organising”, and tempering them. Deep memory possesses quite a different nature and contradictory intentions. It becomes active in dreams, in the subconscious.

Langer recommended researchers to assume a stance similar to that of psychoanalysis – of a particular mistrust towards the accounts they are offered. Due to the fact that “the language for talking about Auschwitz has never crystallised, texts of deep memory require constant work of an interpreter who will remind about the need to cooperate towards redefinition”.<sup>52</sup> One must not only learn to identify those two channels for communicating the past but also “what each of those reveals and what it conceals, and also to see when one transits into the other and be able to appreciate the significance of those moments”.<sup>53</sup>

Therefore, what might had been the factor conducive to suppressing or modifying some topics in the recollections and literary texts, as well as in the studies of Nazi KLs? The knowledge on Lagers usually constitutes a result of various variables. It is formed at the intersection of several factors. Also, it never exists in a void, rather, as I have already mentioned, in a specific social, political, and cultural space.

It was quite relevant that a camp was known from 1) the stories of family members, 2) friends and colleagues, 3) strangers met by accident, 4) historical sources and memoirs, and 5) from own experience.

### **That had not been verbalised (prohibited)**

That which had not been verbalised in Lager prose is an extremely capacious category subject to evolution. In time, the scope of that could be said expanded.<sup>54</sup> Things which had not been verbalised are those which should not be verbalised. Thus, one enters the area of prohibitions, not difficulty with expression (the tragedy of great art touching upon borderline situations).

A nation-based solidarity required the authors of recollections to omit the instances of the active participation of Polish internees in the Nazi terror machine, and idealise the actions and attitudes of their countrymen.

Eroticism was a huge area over which a cloak of silence was cast in Polish writings on Auschwitz. It would be difficult to ignore the influence of morality-based taboo. That applied to issues associated with human sexuality and physiology. They appeared extremely rarely. Some authors of belles lettres and

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>54</sup> Morawiec noted that, in time, both in fiction and memoirs, there occurred a “blurring of the line dividing that which was appropriate and that which should not be presented, an expansion of the scope of appropriateness, and loosening the rules requiring the authors to suppress certain issues” (A. Morawiec, *Literatura w lagrze, lager w literaturze*, p. 13).

memoirs decided that by recalling such areas of human experience in the reality of Auschwitz, they could desecrate the memory of the saved and the dead. In fact, the accounts were assigned specific tasks: moral admonition, and a warning against the return of forces ready to destroy the foundation of European civilisation. The well-known *Ostatni etap* by Wanda Jakubowska was supposed to “evoke hatred towards fascism, and, at the same time, increase one’s faith in humanity”.<sup>55</sup> Any kind of *commonality* of the themes could destroy those plans, and deprive them of their gravity and the appropriate reading. In borderline cases, anything that was associated with the problems of everyday existence and was not related to the suffering of the individual, was eliminated as redundant for the account. That resulted in the creation of a message which sometimes discredited itself in an atmosphere of almost unbearable bombastic presentation.

Homosexuality was among the most closely kept secrets. Homosexuals were tabooed in Nazi Lagers. In the late-1960s, Heinz Heger thus concluded his recollections:

Almost no one has ever written about the fact that among the millions of people whom Hitler had murdered for “racial” reasons, there were also hundreds of thousands of people tortured to death only because they felt attracted to their own sex. Almost no one has shown that Hitler’s madness and that of his yes-men were aimed at not only Jews but also homosexuals. Both were to fall victim of Endlösung, the Final Solution, which was supposed to lead to a total extermination of those people and citizens.<sup>56</sup>

Earlier, when discussing Auschwitz, he stated:

Thousands upon thousands of homosexuals must have lost their tormented lives there, victims of a deliberate operation of destruction by the Hitler regime. And yet till this very day no one has come forward to describe this and honor its victims. To talk about tortured internees, particularly if they were homosexual, seems to be in a bad taste in today’s society.<sup>57</sup>

For a long time, though – not just after WWII but even in the early-1990s, after the fall of communism<sup>58</sup> – “men with the pink triangle” could not speak openly about the harm they suffered. Joanna Ostrowska, the author of the afterword in the Polish translation of Heger’s book, wrote about the silence surrounding the victims

<sup>55</sup> A. Werner, *Zwyczajna apokalipsa*, p. 27.

<sup>56</sup> H. Heger, *Mężczyźni z różowym trójkątem. Świadectwo homoseksualnego więźnia obozu koncentracyjnego z lat 1939–1945*, trans. A. Roseau, Warsaw 2016, p. 129. [Translated from Polish into English]

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>58</sup> The status of research in Polish subject literature was discussed by Ostrowska (*ibid.*, p. 146). Two publications are particularly noteworthy: A. Weseli, “Homoseksualiści i homoseksualizm w KL Auschwitz-Birkenau w świetle «oświadczeń» byłych więźniów obozu”, *Przegląd Historyczny* 2007, issue 3; B. Piętka, “Więźniowie z różowym trójkątem w KL Auschwitz”, *Dzieje Najnowsze* 2014, issue 2.

of Art. 175 still present in Poland. She referred to them as “the outcasts”.<sup>59</sup> “Those persecuted for their sexual orientation remain hidden. They do not belong to the «proper community of victims», they are not the saved. They have been cast out”.<sup>60</sup> Few of those interned for “debauchery” decided to talk about their suffering.

Piotr Chruścielski studied homosexuality using the example of approx. fifty men with “the pink triangle” interned at Stutthof.<sup>61</sup> It was a small fraction of the analyses which ought to be conducted also in the case of other Lagers. However, the path to micro and macro-history is not simple. One cannot, for example, even based on the most detailed reconstruction of the situation of homosexuals in one Lager, construct the network of ideas which would reflect all the intricacies of their fate in the KL empire. Virtually each camp constituted an antonymous entity, a type of a microcosm, and the conditions in which *men with the pink triangle* lived usually differed between them.

The ordeal of homosexual men and homosexual activities constitute a part of a larger phenomenon which requires further study and which has been particularly concealed and suppressed. It is the area of human carnality. Bożena Karwowska began her book with a statement:

Contemporary critical discourses ever more often and emphatically touch upon the areas ousted by patriarchal communities. Literary suppressions applied to mainly the areas of the so-called everyday life and carnality, which [...] was ousted as symbolically assigned to women as being less interesting than the intellectual experiences placed in the centre of the patriarchal understanding of culture.<sup>62</sup>

Carnality in combination with sexuality evoke agitation. Even though one might think that “the human body is one of the topics which enable researchers to delve into Polish camp prose particularly well”,<sup>63</sup> until now, apart from Karwowska’s work, there have not appeared any more significant studies of the area. Existing works limited the theme of the body to signs enabling unequivocal evaluation of camp reality. The same applies to literature. Kulesza referred to that talking about the sacralisation of the body in domestic prose. The body was sacralised in *Apel* by Jerzy Andrzejewski, *Kantata* by Żukrowski, and *Z otchłani*

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<sup>59</sup> Ostrowska probably referred to the words of Joseph Kohout, whose fortunes were described in *Mężczyźni z różowym trójkątem*: “We were to remain isolated as the damnedest of the damned” (H. Heger, *Mężczyźni z różowym trójkątem*, p. 28).

<sup>60</sup> J. Ostrowska, “Afterword” to: H. Heger, *Mężczyźni z różowym trójkątem*, p. 148.

<sup>61</sup> I referred to a speech entitled “Paragraf 175 w świetle zachowanej dokumentacji KL Stutthof” delivered by Piotr Chruścielski during a session *Nazi German Concentration Camps. New research projects and challenges in Poland and Austria* organised in Vienna on 26–27 September 2016. “Ze Stutthofu do Stutthofu. Studium przypadku Paula W.”, «mieszkańca gminy Stutthof, więźnia nr 97431», *Zeszyty Muzeum Stutthof* 2016, issue 4.

<sup>62</sup> B. Karwowska, “Introduction” to: *Ciało. Seksualność. Obozy zagłady*, Krakow 2009, p. 5.

<sup>63</sup> Vide D. Kulesza, “Ciało ludzkie w polskiej literaturze obozowej” [in:] *ibid.*, *W poszukiwaniu istoty rzeczy. Studia i portrety*, Białystok 2015, p. 137.

by Kossak – elevated by introducing it in the martyrdom theme.<sup>64</sup> It is not subject to existence which could downgrade or deform it, exposing it to the contemptuous view of the oppressor, when it becomes a caricatured exterior. The body is rather a victim sacrificed on the altar of faith, honour, and Polishness. Kulesza indicated one important exception: Borowski's prose.<sup>65</sup>

There were, however, more such exceptions. One example was the short story entitled "Profesor Spanner" in *Medaliony*. The body in Nałkowska's book was one of the stages of production, processing, and creation specific for the system of a modern capitalistic company – subject to the ruthless rules of economics. It eliminated the right to burial and rites. The concept of "undead death" brought about by the massive and anonymous nature of the killings was interestingly analysed by Sonia Ruszkowska.<sup>66</sup> A foreshadowing of such an approach to human body – implying consent to its absolute utilisation – could already be found in previous centuries. The 18th and 19th-century "despicable bodies" of those condemned to death, people with untreatable diseases as virtually dead, a fact which legitimised the actions of physicians, certainly led to expanding medical knowledge.<sup>67</sup>

The body in camp texts was often stereotyped: without revealing sex-based differences. An interesting and original view of the issues is offered by feminist and gender methodologies.<sup>68</sup> As Karwowska argued:

by utilising feminist categories, which transcend the traditional application of tools for describing literature, martyrological literature in particular, one can grasp that which previous approaches were not able neither to perceive nor describe, and which was expressed in a text as if against the language which was available for its author.<sup>69</sup>

The fact of noticing, understanding, and appreciating the distinctiveness of the female perspective in viewing Nazi KLs – resulting from the cultural otherness of the sex – occurred late. Since 1975, from the start of the trial against the Majdanek staff at the Düsseldorf court, people have begun to "perceive [women] as a distinct group of victims".<sup>70</sup> Only after that, was it possible to consider the

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 149–151.

<sup>66</sup> S. Ruszkowska, *Każdemu własna śmierć. O przywracaniu podmiotowości ofiarom Zagłady*, Warsaw 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Vide G. Chamayou, *Podłe ciała. Eksperymenty na ludziach w XVIII i XIX wieku*, trans. J. Bodzińska, K. Thiel-Jańczuk, Gdańsk 2012. [Translated from Polish into English]

<sup>68</sup> Vide, e.g. B. Karwowska, *Ciało. Cieleśność. Obozy zagłady*; B. Karwowska, "Womens Luxury Items in Concentration Camps" [in:] *Women and the Holocaust New Perspectives and Challenges*, A. Petö, L. Hecht, K. Krasuska (eds.), Warsaw 2015; A. Ubertowska, "Niewidoczność, sprawczość, podmiot. Perspektywa feministyczna i genderowa w badaniach nad Holocaustem" [in:] *ibid.*, *Holokaust. Auto(tanto)grafie*.

<sup>69</sup> B. Karwowska, *Ciało. Cieleśność. Obozy zagłady*, p. 10.

<sup>70</sup> A. Ubertowska, "Niewidoczność, sprawczość, podmiot. Perspektywa feministyczna i genderowa w badaniach nad Holocaustem" [in:] *Holokaust. Auto(tanto)grafie*, p. 113.

women's voice from Auschwitz as different, but also to discover the mechanisms of suppressing it and submitting to the paradigmatic male narrative. Since the late-1970s, there have appeared academic centres, international conferences have been organised, and the group of people reaching for the feminist or gender methodologies has been growing, all with the goal to talk about Shoah.

The problem is not, however, only to bring to the surface – to name and familiarise today's readers with – that which has been suppressed. One should also pose the question how to ensure a proper status to that which has been absent and suppressed, so that *herstory* was not only “a supplement to the accepted historiographies”.<sup>71</sup>

It is necessary to conduct three-fold activities. First of all, it is necessary to continue documenting, archiving works seeking women's accounts. Secondly, they should become the object of separate analyses and interpretations. One example of that in Polish subject literature was a monograph by Karwowska and a study by Joanna Stöcker-Sobelman.<sup>72</sup> Finally, it would be necessary to engage in a methodological study, as Aleksandra Ubertowska did.<sup>73</sup>

Feminism enables researchers to reach that which is hidden in the narrative of the female world, suppressed by the male (dominating) narrative on the war. When discussing the accounts of women internees in Mauthausen, Piotr Filipkowski indicated two main features differentiating them from men's accounts. At the same time, he defined the general (as broad as possible) cognitive framework, in which one can analyse women's Lager stories: gender and sex.<sup>74</sup>

While appreciating the value of feminist and gender methodologies, one cannot avoid the dangers they carry. Camp-themes texts possess a special status as they discuss a special type of experience. One should bear that in mind to avoid instrumentalising the message. The applied method ought not distort the knowledge of basic facts or lead to relativisation of suffering by inserting it in new interpretative perspectives. That unique character of Auschwitz literature should be considered especially when reading the accounts of direct witnesses. Theoretical tools cannot disregard social or political aspects, or treat a text as an illustration to earlier hypotheses.

Let me use an example. Alvin Rosenfeld, an American scholar, firmly rejected the suggestions of Judy Chicago to blame the patriarchal social structure for the Holocaust. He argued that such an approach is a simplification, which harms the knowledge on the issue. “In Chicago's conception of history, all of our later

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>72</sup> J. Stöcker-Sobelman, *Kobiety Holokaustu. Feministyczna perspektywa w badaniach nad Shoah. Kазus KL Auschwitz-Birkenau*, Warsaw 2012. Vide also chapter “Ekskurs – Mauthausen w nаracjach kobiecych” in a monograph by Filipkowski entitled *Historia mówiona i wojna*, pp. 175–207.

<sup>73</sup> Vide chapter entitled “Gender” in a monograph by Ubertowska entitled *Holokaust. Auto(tanto)grafie*, particularly pp. 113–159.

<sup>74</sup> Vide P. Filipkowski, *Historia mówiona i wojna*, pp. 180–260.

troubles, including those brought on by the Nazis and their allies, have their root in the overthrow of matriarchy by cruelly aggressive, domineering men”.<sup>75</sup> Such an assumption resulted in another: the change in the hierarchic relations between the sexes would produce a world without wars and violence. Rosenfeld attributed that naive approach to Chicago’s artistic insolence; he associated her eccentric lifestyle with her intellectual eccentric behaviour.

Statements similar to that of Chicago could be found in *Męskie fantazje*.<sup>76</sup> Klaus Theweleit found the sources of Nazism in the western system of education, upbringing, as well as in the western model of relations between women and men. The taking down of the patriarchal model is a *sine qua non* condition for lowering the risk of a rebirth of fascism. The goal is to create a world in which men and women could assume interchangeable social roles.<sup>77</sup> Though it was not stated *expressis verbis*, such a change is supported by the hope for dismantling hegemonic masculinity. Its neutralisation is supposed to eliminate the risk of an reintroduction of totalitarian violence. However, there is no academic proof of homosexual masculinity or femininity to be free of aggressive behaviour.<sup>78</sup> Experience shows that that is not the case (to offer some contemporary examples, consider the case of Islamic woman-suicide bombers).

One example of methodological self-awareness was a study by Piotr Krupiński. In it, he suggested “the reading of Polish literature situating itself within the broadly considered area of Shoah through the marginalised until recently animalistic perspective [...]”.<sup>79</sup> What is important, Krupiński understood the risk of utilising the tools of *animal studies* for analysing wartime experiences (including camp experiences). That was one of the most significant doubts which Krupiński offered in a book under the telling title (borrowed from a story by Isaac Bashevis Singer) “Dlaczego gęsi krzyczały?”. How to discuss Shoah from the point of view of *animal studies*, and not to offend the suffering and memory of the victims? Let us go further and ask “how to talk about the often tragic fate of animals in such a unique context as WWII, the Holocaust, and genocide, not to be read as an involuntary manifestation of a debasement of human suffering or even as an act of harming someone’s memory?”<sup>80</sup> With all the (many) doubts, one identifies numerous analogies and common areas created by the specific character of

<sup>75</sup> A. H. Rosenfeld, “Amerykanizacja Holokaustu” [in:] *ibid.*, *Kres Holokaustu*, trans. R. Czekalska, A. Kuczkiewicz-Fraś, Krakow 2015, p. 70. [All fragments in English translated from the Polish version]

<sup>76</sup> K. Theweleit, *Męskie fantazje*, trans. M. Falkowski, M. Herer, Warsaw 2015.

<sup>77</sup> I referred to the theory of hegemonic masculinity by Raewyn W. Connell. Vide, e.g. R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*, Allen & Unwin 1987.

<sup>78</sup> Vide K. Kompisch, *Sprawczyni*, trans. S. Kupisz, N. Badiyan-Siekierzyńska, Warsaw 2012.

<sup>79</sup> P. Krupiński, „Dlaczego gęsi krzyczały”? *Zwierzęta i Zagłada w literaturze polskiej XX i XXI wieku*, Warsaw 2016, p. 13.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.



the experience. Consider, e.g. the Nazi attitude towards human body and it being treated as that of animals processed through a slaughter house. Auschwitz was, in fact, the perfect example of that.

### Zone of silence surrounding the victim

When defining martyrological literature and literature of the “stone world” Werner implicite uncovered the reasons for social acceptance for the former and the reserve for the latter (that for which Borowski’s stories constituted a point of reference). He argued that the martyrological focus constituted a manifestation of conformism, aligned itself to the general awareness, expressed and at the same time predicted the visions regarding the laws which existed in Lagers, and human attitudes and choices. The way of thinking about Auschwitz which originated from *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu* and *Pożegnanie z Marią* questioned the common conviction regarding camp reality<sup>81</sup>. However, the author of “Proszę państwa do gazu” displayed “an attitude of disengaged scepticism in any ideologised language”.<sup>82</sup> The truth about Auschwitz stating that the main goal was to survive – and concocted from ideological: Christian and Marxist references – proved unacceptable in the 1940s, and even later it was problematic.

Lager literature had to fulfil specific promises: it had to unequivocally separate the areas of the activity of the oppressor and the victim, identify the sources of evil, and formulate an anti-war warning (in the case of communist, it had to be combined with the criticism of the capitalist system, in the case of authors associated with the Catholic community – of the contemporary civilisation derived from socially corruptive phenomena).

It was that manner of presenting the persecuted and the persecutor that became the starting point for applying the fundamental division into the literature of the “stone world” and martyrological literature.<sup>83</sup> The fate of the victims was supposed to offer consolation and state the truth about the trust in humanist ideals and patterns at almost every step, while the image of the oppressors was supposed to prove the savagery of their inhuman nature. Significantly, there could be no transition between the world of the torturers and the tortured. They were supposed to be divided by an impenetrable chasm.

<sup>81</sup> Paweł Wolski – in a study comparing the outputs of Tadeusz Borowski and Primo Levi – argued that they disputed both the forming in their time strictly defined view of camp reality, and the expected reactions of the readers. Borowski and Levi disputed the host of social visions of the world behind the barbed wire. Vide P. Wolski, *Tadeusz Borowski – Primo Levi. Paralela. Przepisywanie literatury Holocaustu*, Warsaw 2013.

<sup>82</sup> M. Januskiewicz, “Borowski contra... Borowski” [in:] *ibid.*, *Horyzonty nihilizmu. Gombrowicz – Borowski – Różewicz*, Poznań 2009, p. 212.

<sup>83</sup> Vide A. Werner, *Zwyczajna apokalipsa* (chapter “Konfrontacje”, pp. 216–257).

Borowski's proposition, which seemed as if a self-accusation, to offer an account of how the saved managed to survive directed the readers' focus towards the victim who was assigned a hallowed status. The blurring of the line between the oppressor and the victim, considered as provocative, led in "Ludzie, którzy szli", "Proszę państwa do gazu" and "Dzień na Harmenzach" to removing it, resulted in a cognitive chaos, and ethical unease of the reader (and the witness as well).

Though Borowski as well as Krasiński in the short story *Wózek* diagnosed the cases of moral depravation in Auschwitz as a result of adjusting to camp conditions (the state of Lagered man), Tadeusz Hołuj in *Puste pole* presented Häftlings who profaned the memory and the graves of the victims as they joined the ranks of seekers of Jewish gold, defilers of places marked with unimaginable crimes.

The surprising images in *Puste pole* refer to one of the most embarrassing issues in the history of Nazi Lagers. The problem of looting the locations of mass extermination of civilians was an anathema for a long time. It did appear in local press, columns, it existed in collective memory, but it did not constitute a focus of any extensive study or analysis.<sup>84</sup> It was recorded as a fact in the history of a small community which knew of it well, but did nothing with that knowledge. One cannot refer those judgements to literature. In various ways and at various stages of the post-WWII history of Poland writers recorded the activities of camp vultures.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, contrary to what Jan Tomasz Gross argued, domestic prose did not forget about those who were led by greed to cemeteries: mass graves, and Lagers.<sup>86</sup>

Two particular cases are connected with the zone of the victim: of the persecuted who became part of the criminal mechanism, and of the Muselmann.

The notion of kapo or block functionary in Lagers is extremely complex. It applied to Häftlings who were condemned to suffering, in the eyes of the oppressor they were always lower-grade beings, contemptible, and subject to the oppressor's will. At the same time, they assumed the role of cruel executors of the instructions of the camp authorities. The problem of the Jewish kapo adds yet another complication – one stemming from the particularly tragic fate of that nation in the "era of the ovens". The attitude of the leadership of Judenrats and Jewish Ghetto Police in the ghettos has been since at least *Eichmann in Jerusalem* by Hannah Arendt the object of a major dispute. A similar problem applied to Jewish functionary prisoners. However, it has never become the object of any in-depth

<sup>84</sup> After 1989 at least two historical publications should be mentioned which featured the theme of the "diggers" more extensively: M. Rusiniak, *Obóz zagłady Treblinka II w pamięci społecznej*, Warsaw 2008, and R. Kuwałek, *Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu*, Lublin 2010. Both studies included bibliographic references to press releases published before 1949, i.e. before the Stalinist era, and the time of consistent suppression of the topic.

<sup>85</sup> Vide also my essay entitled "Nowe Eldorado" in a book entitled *Tematy (nie)opisane*, Krakow 2013.

<sup>86</sup> Vide J. T. Gross, *Złote żniwa. Rzecz o tym, co się działo na obrzeżach zagłady Żydów*, Krakow 2011.

studies, and it still constitutes a blank spot within Shoah research.<sup>87</sup> In fact, the doubts regarding Jewish kapos and block functionaries have a broader reach:

Today, concentration camps can be viewed as complex social structures. However, there have been no studies of the community life in specific camps, as in the case of the ghettos in Warsaw, Łódź, and Kaunas. Consequently, there exist no more extensive studies regarding the internal frictions, solidarity, collaboration, serving the SS, or the help offered to other internees. There have been published only a few articles regarding Jewish kapos and block functionaries. There are no studies regarding the activities of individuals in the camps.<sup>88</sup>

Another type of victims has also received modest research attention. Internees with black or green badges have usually constituted a negative background in the accounts of the saved – as bandits, criminals, murderers, and offenders who eagerly fulfilled the function of kapos.<sup>89</sup> They did not deserve any significant mention in the state policy or general reception. “Though the reprisals to which other internees fell victim also constituted an element of the Nazi occupation policy and were sometimes just as severe, they were not considered as something entitling to special consideration or treatment”, – Zofia Wóycicka stated.<sup>90</sup>

Almost everything we know about the *black badges* came from *outside* accounts.<sup>91</sup> Just like in the case of homosexuals, their individual voices have not resonated, or have but very rarely. That in an obvious way hinders the academic discourse, though it does not prevent it altogether. Unfortunately, no substantial Polish study of criminal internees has been written as of yet. Why is that? First of all, due to meagre sources, which in turn are a result of the resistance of that group of victims to revealing their camp experiences. Secondly, of a certain significance was the PRL’s policy-induced silence surrounding all inconvenient, and “perverse” topics challenging the edifying image – preferred by the authorities – of the victims of Nazi Lagers. Thirdly, even after 1989, when the old authorities lost their influence, it was (has been) suspicious to study the fortunes of crimi-

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<sup>87</sup> Vide, e.g. O. Ben-Naftali, Y. Tuval, “Punishing international crimes committed by the persecuted. The kapo trials in Israel (1950s-1960s)”, *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 2006 (March); R. Brot, “The Gray Zone of Collaboration and the Israeli Courtroom”, [in:] *Jewish Honor Courts: Revenge, Retribution, and Reconciliation in Europe and Israel after the Holocaust*, L. Jockusch, G. N. Finder (eds.), Wayne State University Press 2015.

<sup>88</sup> V. Buser, “Karl Demerer – przywódca elity obozowej w Blechhammer” [in:] *Elity i przedstawiciele społeczności żydowskiej podczas II wojny światowej (1939–1945)*, M. Grądzkiej-Rejak and A. Namysło (eds.) (being printed).

<sup>89</sup> Their German provenance further amplified their negative evaluation. If an interned criminal was German, she/he was considered as the worst sort in the camp community.

<sup>90</sup> Z. Wóycicka, *Przerwana żałoba*, p. 80.

<sup>91</sup> Find out more on the subject: A. Prenninger, “Zapomniane ofiary: «Kryminaliści» i «asocialni» więźniowie w społeczności obozu w Mauthausen”, a speech delivered during the session *Nazi German Concentration Camps. New research projects and challenges in Poland and Austria* organised in Vienna on 26–27 September 2016.

nals since Nazi reprisals cannot lift the guilt of the arrested. On the contrary, the innocence of the arrested proved the cruel nature of the notion of a Lager itself. Black badges, then, constituted a group of Häftlings for whom there is a “rational” explanation of their serving their sentence – their criminal offences would also be condemned in a democratic world. Thus, women and men with black badges violated the community of innocent victims. They constituted a crack in the narratives on Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Stutthoff, and other centres of Nazi terror.

After WWII ended, there began a spontaneous process of developing a hierarchy of the victims, both in the east and west of Europe. At the top, there were political internees as those who fought the regime, those who received the glory of the heroes and steadfast fighters as if by default. They became the guardians of the memory.<sup>92</sup> The elevation of the “politicals” led to overshadowing Häftlings who suffered for reasons other than racist or nationalistic. That group included homosexuals, lesbians, and those forced to prostitution.<sup>93</sup> As Ostrowska stated in her article:

In 1961, during the preparations to open the Sachsenhausen memorial site, the barrack which housed the Puff [Nazi brothel] was destroyed. A similar situation occurred in the Dachau camp. The goal of such operations was to maintain in the discourse the “purity” of the victims of concentration camps through censoring the recollections. Thus, a false image of camp life was created, which from then on has been stripped of any manifestations of human sexuality.<sup>94</sup>

Female prostitute-internees (have) kept their silence because their experiences could disturb the official image of Auschwitz or Dachau. In communist states, the tabooing of forced prostitution was supported by the authorities as an element of social didactics. Their fate constituted only a fragment of an undesired past which evoked shame and embarrassment.

The same principle of maintaining the proper image of the victims and amplifying their correct image was the basis of the ban on *Lagersprache*. As Tadeusz Drewnowski, Justyna Szczęśna and I worked on the critical review of Borowski’s works, we only partly extended the list of “Auschwitz terms”. In line with the spirit of the stories, we omitted the words which were present in the manuscript, commonly considered offensive, yet typical for the camp communication system.<sup>95</sup> Borowski did not introduce them into the stories for fear of their interfering with the texture of the prose, in which the mass crime was conducted efficiently and without emotions as its true nature was closer to a bureaucratic newspeak than linguistic explicitness. By constructing the image of the provocatively idyllic Auschwitz tale laced with irony, the author of *Pożegnanie z Marią* wanted to

<sup>92</sup> J. Ostrowska, “Zapomniane ofiary nazizmu – figura prostytutki obozowej i jej wyparcie w dyskursie pohołokaustowym” [in:] *Auschwitz i Holokaust. Dylematy i wyzwania polskiej edukacji*, P. Trojański (ed.), Oświęcim 2008, p. 285.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 290.

<sup>95</sup> Vide T. Borowski, *Pisma*, S. Buryła, T. Drewnowski, J. Szczęśna (eds.), Krakow 2004–2005.

remain within the convention in which there is no place for cursing, scatologia, and expressionistic dissonance.

*Lagersprache*, was, of course, present in Auschwitz. Kossak avoided quoting it for different reasons than Borowski. For her, a deeply religious person, the camp slang was a manifestation of moral decay, a sin, and a proof of depravity of Häftlings. She argued that “moral purity in [that type of] texts was aligned with chastity, thus texts aiming at strict definition of the limits of dignity stand out for their use of self-censorship, which eliminates from the narration anything which is base or solely physical”.<sup>96</sup> An excursion to such areas also carried the threat of the relativisation of people’s attitudes. *Lagersprache* revealed the existence of an area which Primo Levi called the “grey zone”.<sup>97</sup> When considering why almost throughout the PRL period *Lagersprache* remained outside the area of linguistic study, Danuta Wesołowska mentioned, apart from censorship, another reason: “In fact, researchers considered it a foul jargon consisting profanity and twisted German”.<sup>98</sup>

The *Lagersprache* avoided by Kossak was, in fact, in camp prose a part of an authenticating strategy in the stories along such categories as the plot and characters.<sup>99</sup> As Wolski noted, *Określenia oświęcimskie* in Borowski’s output constituted “an example of the formation of the figures of the witness and the testimony”.<sup>100</sup> That was also Morawiec’s view – as an authenticating strategy – in the drama mentioned by him by Mieczysław Lurczyński entitled *Stara gwardia*.<sup>101</sup>

The Muselmanm did belong, in general, to the zone of the victims, yet a special type of *suppression* applied to her/him. They were the victims, yet with a special status. Giorgio Agamben referred to them that they occupied the “third realm”. That was because the “the Muselmann is an indefinite being in whom not only humanity and non-humanity, but also vegetative existence and relation, physiology and ethics, medicine and politics, and life and death continuously pass through each other”.<sup>102</sup> Before Agamben another Italian posed a question regarding that peculiar category of internee who was the only one to be able to report on the phenomenon of the camp, and was also the only one without a choice: had to remain silent. However, that paradox – raised by various researchers, including

<sup>96</sup> O. Orzeł Wargskog, “Granice godności. Granice literatury” [in:] *Porzucić etyczną arogancję*, p. 32.

<sup>97</sup> P. Levi, *Pogrążeni i ocaleni*, trans. S. Kasprzyński, Krakow 2007.

<sup>98</sup> D. Wesołowska, *Słowa z piekła rodem. Lagersprache*, Krakow 1996, p. 22. An interesting analysis of *Lagersprache* was conducted by Olga Orzeł Wargskog in an essay “Granice godności”. “Granice literatury”, pp. 44–54.

<sup>99</sup> P. Wolski, *Tadeusz Borowski – Primo Levi*, p. 136.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>101</sup> Vide essay: A. Morawiec, „Niech ludzie sądzą”. *O dramacie „Stara gwardia” Mieczysława Lurczyńskiego* [in:] *ibid.*, *Literatura w lagrze, lager w literaturze*.

<sup>102</sup> G. Agamben, *Co zostaje z Auschwitz. Archiwum i świadek (Homo sacer III)*, trans. S. Królak, Warsaw 2008, p. 48.

philosophers and literary scientists – cannot be treated as a proof that the phenomenon of the camp cannot be grasped.<sup>103</sup> It is rather a point in support of the statement that we shall never know the whole truth about Auschwitz. We lack the knowledge which could be offered by the *Häftling* suspended between humanity and a non-human form – the *homo sacer* as Agamben referred to her/him.<sup>104</sup>

The Muselmann's silence did not belong to the volitional zone. It was a result of the decision of the one who kept silent. "Those who did so did not return, or their capacity for observation was paralysed by suffering and incomprehension".<sup>105</sup> The ability to conduct even the most basic thinking on one's situation in the KL was outside the cognitive view of the Muselmann. Just like any acts of participation in culture understood as a set of behaviours acquired through socialisation were inaccessible for her/him. Thus, the relevant task of giving testimony – with which writings on Nazi camps have been coping since the beginning – was cancelled by the fear of the world, and placement between life and death. Sometimes, in fact, one can find testimonies of people who managed to leave that state. Even though those are always – inevitably – stories constructed not from the inside of the experience, but after returning to the living, it is worth quoting one such account:

That was the end. I was losing any strength that was left in me, I walked around in a trance, half-fainted, and in that state the line between a dream and reality began to fade. When I was awake, I started seeing things which were not really there. A simple stone transformed before my very eyes into a loaf of bread, and a pink cloth into a slice of ham. During the muster, there would come doubts whether I was really standing at the muster or maybe everything was just a dream. At that level of utter exhaustion even my memory was failing. One day when we were allowed to write letters I was not able to recall neither the surname nor the address of my own brother, one of the people closest to me.<sup>106</sup>

Once again it demonstrates the radical difference in the status of the Muselmann as an area which cannot be described. We do not possess any journals or memoirs of the Muselmann that were written on a regular basis, *in statu nascendi*. The silence of the Muselmann is for us the final silence. That might be the only truth about Auschwitz which we as readers and researchers will never be allowed to know. However, when referring to Tadeusz Borowski who for some time was in a Muselmanned status, Bożena Shallcross questioned Agamben's thesis: "The knowledge that the writer shares with us undermines the most problematic side of Agamben's view, i.e. the emphasis on the inability to restore oneself from Muselmannment combined with the ability to relay the intimate knowledge

<sup>103</sup> I referred to the notion and its understanding proposed by Andrzej Werner. Vide chapter entitled "Fenomenologia obozu" [in:] *ibid.*, *Zwyczajna apokalipsa*.

<sup>104</sup> G. Agamben, *Homo sacer. Suwerenna władza i nagie życie*, trans. S. Królak, Warsaw 2008. [All fragments in English as in: Agamben Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Zone Books: New York 2002]

<sup>105</sup> P. Levi, *Pogrążeni i ocaleni*, p. 15.

<sup>106</sup> A. Gładysz, *Obóz śmierci*, Łódź 1962, pp. 187–188.



of a borderline experience”.<sup>107</sup> Stanisław Grzesiuk in *Pięć lat kacetu* also talked about himself as a Muselmann. His account was one from a world regarding which Agamben offered an arbitrary conclusion that it remained outside the zone of verbalisation in its entirety while the ability to describe it constituted the act of founding the ethics of the witness and the testimony.<sup>108</sup>

### Zone of silence of/surrounding the persecutor

In camp writings, the Nazis are usually described not “from the inside”, but from the perspective of the persecuted.<sup>109</sup> Such an attitude is also dominant in academic research. That is caused by two issues. First of all, in the whole host of memories regarding Lagers, researchers have rarely found any accounts recorded by the persecutors. The autobiographic material offered directly by the persecutors and available in Polish is scant, and most of all (just like that recorded in other languages) requires a critical approach.

The analysis of the perspective of the butcher is hampered by her/his silence. As Gitta Sereny stated:

they did their utmost to suppress – to ‘block’ – their experiences and deeds. This was apparent time and again over the years, during the many NS (Nazi-Crime) trials in Germany and those in Israel.<sup>110</sup>

The fact that the specific area of knowledge associated with the places of mass extermination was marginalised was not only yet another academic challenge that has been overlooked. Those are questions, as Sereny argued somewhat portentously, “deeply relevant to our present and to our children’s future”.<sup>111</sup>

Secondly, in people’s minds “to understand” is equal to “to forgive”. Therefore, any attempt at explicating the actions of the Nazis could be viewed as an indirect approval of what had happened, and exculpation of those who had done it. In fact, the issue is difficult to settle completely. There will always exist some fear that such works as *Explaining Hitler* by Ron Rosenbaum or *Lekcje ciemności* by Dariusz Czaja might result in quite the opposite as the researchers intended.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>107</sup> B. Shallcross, *Rzeczy i Zagłada*, Krakow 2010, p. 167.

<sup>108</sup> K. Liszka, “Agamben. Czy możliwe jest «wyjście z obozu?»” [in:] *ibid.*, *Etyka i pamięć o Zagładzie*, Warsaw 2016, pp. 118–119.

<sup>109</sup> One exception was a book: M. Tomkiewicz, P. Semków, *Profesor Rudolf Spanner 1895–1960. Naukowiec w III Rzeszy*, Gdynia 2010.

<sup>110</sup> G. Sereny, *W stronę ciemności. Rozmowy z komendantem Treblinki*, trans. J. K. Milencki, Warsaw 2002, p. 8. [English version as in: Sereny Gitta. *Into That Darkness: From Mercy Killing To Mass Murder*. Vintage Digital 2013]

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>112</sup> R. Rosenbaum, *Wyjaśnianie Hitlera. W poszukiwaniu źródeł zła*, trans. A. Siewior-Kuś, Warsaw 2001; D. Czaja, *Lekcje ciemności*, Wołowiec 2009.

Those who undertake to view the issue “from the side” of the beast usually seize the arguments inserted in the “Epilogue” to a collective publication edited by Leonard Newman and Ralph Erber: “If this book makes people more aware of the social situations that could lead them to become participants in mass murder – and if in so doing, it makes even a tiny contribution toward preventing that from happening – it will have been worth it”.<sup>113</sup>

Regardless of the doubt raised by the mentioned category of understanding/exculpating, for at least two decades a study supplementing the image of the Lager (war) from the point of view of the butcher has been developing with a necessary component: the point of view of the victim. The oppressor ousted from the academic discourse is becoming again the subject of thorough study of sociologists, social psychologists, philosophers, literary scientists, historians, and political scientists. Nonetheless, one of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century embodiments of evil had long remained outside the focus of contemporary humanities. The trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 proved a breakthrough moment, however, it was only since the 1980s and the following decade that academic studies (supported by press releases) devoted to the etiology of evil embodied by the Nazi murderer have started to appear on a regular basis. The change of the focus meant, e.g. an attempt at entering the world of the murderers, and their system of values without prior assumptions as they could interfere with the act of cognition. Some things they said during the trials should be considered as the truth, not lies. Surely to some extent the silence surrounding the oppressor was a result of a sense of helplessness of the academic community, which automatically considered the testimonies of the Nazis as fraudulent and used only to present themselves in a more favourable light to avoid the punishment. That was sometimes the case. However, one should not consider that as a general rule. Though it is not easy, one must concede that there existed a Nazi “morality”, that the relationship “between the mass crime and morality is not contradictory in nature, it rather has the character of a mutual determination”.<sup>114</sup>

The silence surrounding the Nazi murderer from Auschwitz must be considered as a result of GUKPPiW activities. Another reason is the meagre number of testimonies of the culprits (though not as meagre as in the case of the accounts of internees who were criminals or men with the pink triangle). Some – like *Commandant of Auschwitz* by Rudolf Hoess – raise questions regarding their reliability. In the admissions of the commandant of Auschwitz one can identify a story modified with a hope for avoiding the death penalty.

The shape of the recollections of the oppressors, apart from their intentional attempts at whitewashing their actions and their participation in the crimes, was

<sup>113</sup> *Zrozumieć Zagładę. Społeczna psychologia Holokaustu*, L. S. Newman, R. Erber (eds.), trans. M. Budziszewska, A. Czarna, E. Dryll, A. Wójcik, Warsaw 2009, p. 306.

<sup>114</sup> H. Welzer, *Sprawcy. Dlaczego zwykli ludzie dokonują masowych mordów*, trans. M. Kurowska, Warsaw 2010, p. 42. [Translated from Polish into English]

largely influenced by the factors associated with the mechanisms of remembering and forgetting. We instinctively remove from our memory those acts which present us in an unfavourable moral light.

In communist Poland, no separate studies into the mystery of the fascist murderers were conducted (if one excludes the propaganda press pieces). The most important achievements in the field were made by the team directed by Prof. Antoni Kępiński.<sup>115</sup>

Polish literature has put much more effort into finding the answer to the question on the origins of evil than all the historians, sociologists, and psychologists studying the issue have. It preceded the activities of the academic community. Since the 1960s, Polish camp prose released at least several important works the authors who attempted to understand the minds and motivations of the murderer in the black uniform (e.g. the classic Auschwitz stories by Borowski or *Medaliony* by Nałkowska).

One of the first attempts at penetrating the Nazi mind was made by Kossak in her memoir entitled *Z otchłani* and by Morcinek in *Listy spod morwy*. A perspective similar to that of Kossak and Morcinek for viewing the oppressors can be found in *Uniwersytet zbiorów*.<sup>116</sup> The text by Michał Maksymilian Borwicz diverged significantly from Borowski's perspective. It offered an image of the pathological nature of the SS officers. In *Uniwersytet zbiorów* it was met with the narrator's anger, and boiling emotions. It was close to Kossak's works and the devils in human flesh inhabiting Auschwitz.<sup>117</sup> The author of *Ze śmiercią na ty* wrote about one of the Janowska "goons" that his face reminded the figure of Mephisto. Such examples were not uncommon. In an attempt to describe what had happened in Auschwitz, Krystyna Justa offered the following image: "The Devil rejoiced seeing people bewildered, degraded, and pushed to the very bottom. Chortling, he announced the arrival of his kingdom".<sup>118</sup>

In the 1970s, the image of the German in Lager literature started to improve slowly. The process was longer and more difficult than that in the case of texts depicting other portions of occupation experiences as Auschwitz was a synonym of the ultimate evil embodied by the German uniform. Thus, camp prose was cautious about any changes in the image of the German. Even though already in the 1960s in a book entitled *Wózek* Janusz Krasiński depicted a somewhat bored and jovial oppressor, the image did not permeate into the general imagination. Neither did it produce any continuations in the literature devoted to Nazi Lagers as the SS officers embodied the absolute evil. They were the masters of *amur mundi*, a world in which

<sup>115</sup> Their works were collected in, e.g. a volume entitled *Rytm życia*, Krakow 1994.

<sup>116</sup> M. M. Borwicz, *Uniwersytet zbiorów*, Krakow 1946.

<sup>117</sup> From time to time extreme emotions in *Uniwersytet zbiorów* were tempered with cutting irony. That is the final reason which prevents Borwicz's account from being identified with the style of *Z otchłani*.

<sup>118</sup> K. Justa, *Z bagna i kamieni*, Warsaw 1948, p. 199.

the reflexes of the butchers were to contradict their demonic nature. Those appeared as facts questioning the Auschwitz Pandemonium. If Auschwitz was to be the epitome of Nazism, it could not have included even the slightest signs of goodness. That was the prevailing conviction of the authorities and the citizens of the PRL.

Marian Pankowski went the furthest on Borowski's path of shattering the socially accepted (expected) image of the culprit. In the short story entitled *Moja SS Rottenführer Johanna* – a text focussed on a description of physical love between an SS female officer and a Polish male internee – he broke two bans with just one pen stroke. By using a sensual image of a woman-criminal with raging sexual temperament, the writer not only removed the line (or at least weakened it considerably) dividing the oppressor and the oppressed, but also violated another taboo. He switched the roles of the butcher and the victim as a result of which the SS officer (a woman) became an erotic slave to the internee (a man). The author of *Z Auszvicu do Belsen* led the narration in such a way that he switched the roles of the butcher and the victim in its course. As one specialist in the area stated, *Moja SS Rottenführer Johanna* offered yet another proof of the influence of patriarchy, one which is even more significant as it indicated that the pressure of heterosexual dependence is superior even to the division line of authority so fundamental for camp reality<sup>119</sup>. Thus, the reader – recklessly and against her/his will – takes the side of the discarded Rottenführer Johanna.<sup>120</sup> Additionally, Pankowski, provocatively against the Romantic tradition, placed a Warsaw Uprising partisan in the role of the sexual partner of the Nazi supervisor. Kajetan Mojsak aptly read the intention behind the author's decisions:

The attack on the “myths and stereotypes” is, in fact, not as much an epistemological attitude used for reaching some objective truth on the reality, but rather an existential one – an attempt at releasing the *I* from the captivity of abstraction, from the zone of influence of distorted principles not matching personal experiences, unable to organise the fluid matter of individually experienced reality.<sup>121</sup>

### Artist zone – zone of an absolute ban

Within camp writings there are places which ought to remain empty, passed over with silence. If one can talk about the need to maintain some taboo in Lager experience, that includes death in the gas chambers.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>119</sup> P. Krupiński, *Ciało, historia, kultura*, p. 164.

<sup>120</sup> Pankowski stated clearly: “For her [the SS officer] it was love filled with sacrifice, she even went to his mother to Warsaw to bring her sugar, coffee, tea, and money. For him – nothing more than sexual play and vulgar boasting. In the story, I took her side”. (“Żegnaj Maniuś, żegnaj”, p. 5, as quoted in: P. Krupiński, *Ciało, historia, kultura*, p. 165)

<sup>121</sup> K. Mojsak, *Groteska w polskiej prozie narracyjnej 1945–1968*, Warsaw 2014, p. 179.

<sup>122</sup> At least two artists, according to some critics, violated that ban in critical art: Artur Żmijewski in *Berk* and Santiago Sierra in *245 cubic metres*. On this topic vide K. Bojarska, “Sztuka, która krzywdzi? Granice gestu krytycznego wobec bolesnej pamięci (a cenzura)”, *Konteksty* 2013, issue 3.

However, in the case of the death in the gas chambers, our knowledge is so fragmentary that any access to the past proves extremely limited. We cannot cope with mass death in its essence since we cannot *see* it, confront it, since it continues to function as a set of unconfirmed research hypotheses formulated by historians based on little data.<sup>123</sup>

It is difficult to state unequivocally to what extent the lack of testimonies “from the inside” constitutes the cause of tabooing the death in the chambers, and to what extent it has been a result of the terror of the experience known from the accounts of the members of the Sonderkommando. We also know about the gassing procedure, and even about the reaction of the human body to Zyklon B, from other indirect testimonies (Ruszkowska included some of those in an annex to her monograph).<sup>124</sup> They create an atmosphere of unimaginable crime and fear that it casts around.

The imperative to maintain silence regarding the death in the gas chambers has been consistently observed in Polish prose. The rule was, it seems, only violated by Tadeusz Borowski and Alexander Czerski. In *Muzyka w Herzenburgu*, we look inside a gas chamber through, what is most significant, not the eyes of the victim but the oppressor. Only Czerski dared to offer the reader an “insider” account of the killing process. His *Nieśmiertelni* is a story about the love between an Auschwitz criminal Gerhard Palitzsch and a Jewish woman Katja Singer. The paramours, contrary to what we know about Palitzsch’s life, die in Auschwitz. The character-narrator peers into the chamber:

I slide away the cover of the viewer. By the wall, twisted, dense piles of bodies and in the centre... yes, I can see it clearly... they lie. A red dress, torn on the naked Jew, Palitzsch, still twitching in convulsions of pleasure and death. Naked arms and legs of the Jew wrapped around him like an octopus with love, fury, and revenge.<sup>125</sup>

In Borowski’s short story, the fragment discussing the death in the gas chamber is as follows:

The sick were taken aside; the first fifty healthy ones were called for bathing. I went immediately as I didn’t want to watch the suffering of those who were still waiting for their turn. In the vestibule, we were told to disrobe, and fold our clothes neatly which were to be sent for disinfection. Then, we were told to enter the chamber naked. We did not resist, we were indifferent. At that point, I realised why Jews did not resist when they were pushed into the chambers. You will never understand it. When the door was closed behind us, we began to bid farewell to our lives. Some cuddled and cried not being ashamed of their fear. Others bid farewell like men, kissing each other on their unshaven cheeks. Others yet clutched their lips with only their eyes glowed feverishly. We looked at the whitewashed windowless walls, at the door which closed tightly behind us, at the concrete floor in which they cunningly and pointlessly made channels

<sup>123</sup> S. Ruszkowska, *Każdemu własna śmierć*, p. 434.

<sup>124</sup> Vide *ibid.*, p. 439–460.

<sup>125</sup> A. Czerski, *Nieśmiertelni. Powieść*, Tel Aviv 1964, p. 282.

for removing water and placed a wooden grating on it; at the shiny metal shower heads from which gas will soon start hissing. After all, I thought to myself bitterly, we murdered other nations, why should they spare us? But they had something to die for: they fought for their freedom. But you, man, what are you dying for? For fascism? At that point, I cried for the first time in my life. Then the showers hissed. Terrible screams rose suddenly in the room, but they faded just as quickly. All of a sudden, the hissing stopped and the showers sprayed us with warm, smiling, bubbling water.<sup>126</sup>

Borowski did not decide to “peep through the viewer”, as Czerski did. *Dzień na Harmenzach* did not offer an *explicite* of death in the chamber. The author of *Ludzie, którzy szli* left the cruelty of dying to the imagination of the readers. He used the technique of suspense, gradually increasing the tension, known well from crime stories. When the German soldiers gathered in the room awaited for the end, “the showers sprayed [them] with warm, smiling, bubbling water”. In Borowski’s prose, the line which cannot be crossed is defined by the suffering of the victims in the gas chambers.

The situation is different in Czerski’s prose. Even if it was not the artist’s intention to evoke a scandal, rather to “amplify his message”,<sup>127</sup> to stir the reader up, the final result proved a poor type of provocation. The motif of revenge in the gas chamber (“A red dress, torn on the naked Jew, Palitzsch, still twitching in convulsions of pleasure and death. Naked arms and legs of the Jew wrapped around him like an octopus with love, fury, and revenge”) crossed the limits of what is appropriate and in good taste. It is tawdry.

Borowski stopped in the face of the temptation to peer inside the chamber. His decision was not caused by fear of the former Häftling, but a writer’s concern about the word being shallow. Instead of an account of the horror of death one could expect its caricature or something which in no way would communicate the proper meaning of the perfected killings.

Therefore, it is necessary for the mass crime in the chamber to remain a blank spot within the Lager story. Surely art or historiography constructed on the basis of the *mimesis* category has no access to it. Art can only develop equivalents of that experience and assign pseudonyms to it, while historiography can only reach the point which is the starting point for art. Frank Ankersmit concluded: “Hence, when confronted with the ultimate challenge – accounting for the Holocaust – it is aesthetics, and not the categories of the factually true and the morally good, to which history should appeal”.<sup>128</sup> In the case of the gas chamber, the well-known principle

<sup>126</sup> T. Borowski, “Muzyka w Herzenburgu” [in:] *ibid.*, *Proza 2*, S. Buryła (ed.), Kraków 2004, p. 245.

<sup>127</sup> Several arguments in support of such an explanation can be found in *Nieśmiertelni*. Its pursuit of punchy exaggerated descriptions of the torment.

<sup>128</sup> F. Ankersmit, “Pamiętając Holocaust: żałoba i melancholia”, trans. E. Domańska, [in:] *ibid.*, *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie. Studia z teorii historiografii*, Kraków 2004, p. 403. [All fragments in English translated from Polish] Through similar conclusions, Bartłomiej Krupa



by Frank Ankersmit of substituting the discourse of history with the discourse of memory – in the face of one’s inability to express the truth about Shoah – is further justified through the lack of testimonies written “from the inside”. “The memory of the Holocaust must remain a disease, a psychological illness from which we will never stop suffering”.<sup>129</sup> The gas chamber, just like a crematorium, being one of the cultural markers of Shoah, ought to remain outside literary description.

### Zone of reception

Up to this point, I have mainly discussed the obstacles preventing one from articulating the experience from the part of the her/him providing the account. But, in fact, on the reverse side of the problems with expressions there are the problems with understanding on the part of the reader. Ankersmit stated: “The more painful, dramatic, and overwhelming the story is, the more tense, distrustful, and cautious the audience is and the quicker it wants to withdraw”.<sup>130</sup> It usually evokes, regardless of its volitional zone, a desire to flee.

Disbelief and scepticism constitute a defensive mechanism, a cloak under which a terrified individual wishes to hide. She/he is stupefied when confronting a world for which it is very difficult to find even the most rickety equivalent in the known reality. In order to understand anything of it, one must engage in the endless task of seeking similarities. Thus another conflict arises. The understanding, by utilising analogy, of the basic cognitive mechanism must fail. “The impossibility of understanding and communicating results from the fact that the described world and experiences suspend the previous categories, and transcend any life, psychological, historical or any other probability”.<sup>131</sup> In order to be able to come closer to the world of the concentration camp, it is necessary to use descriptive methods which interfere with the act of communication. The listener will not grasp much of what a Lager was when looking for points of convergence. The situation of researchers is not much better. According to Langer: “between that what [...] [an internee] experienced and our ability to grasp those experiences there is a vast expanse of imagination”.<sup>132</sup> Distortions of the image are inevitable:

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identified the categories of scientific and ethical (non-scientist) historiographies. The latter utilises non-classical description methods departing from discursive cognition to seek ethical engagement of the cognitive entity. B. Krupa, *Wspomnienia obozowe jako specyficzna odmiana pisarstwa historycznego*, Krakow 2006, pp. 11–17.

<sup>129</sup> F. Ankersmit, “Pamiętając Holocaust”, [in:] *ibid.*, p. 425.

<sup>130</sup> L. Langer, “Pamięć głęboka («ja» ukryte)”, [in:] *ibid.*, *Świadectwa Zagłady w rumowisku pamięci*, p. 37.

<sup>131</sup> K. Chmielewska, “Mamy bombę i nie zawahamy się jej zakopać” [in:] *Zagłada w „Medalionach”*. *Tekst i konteksty*, T. Żukowski (ed.), Warsaw 2016, p. 106.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Memoir literature, through the strategies at the disposal of its authors – through the style, chronology, analogies, imaging, dialogue, principles of constructing the characters, and the coherent moral perspective – aims at limiting the space introducing us to the unknown world using known (and thus comforting?) literary devices. The reflex to portray (and thus to touch up) the reality which is being described seems overwhelming.<sup>133</sup>

Langer introduced the category of the “impossibility of reality”. “That inability is inherent not in the reality itself but in us who cannot perceive it as reality”.<sup>134</sup> Let us now refer to a literary illustration. Even though the authorities of the PRL often and willingly used wartime accounts, their consent and encouragement for utilising such stories as an educational element was hindered not only regarding the nature of the published literary texts. The following dialogue between a headmaster and a student who had gone through a concentration camp raised the issue of those contradictory goals:

“[...] We all sometimes tell the students about things not related to the curriculum. It’s just that your experiences are a bit drastic”.

“It’s not my fault”.

“Obviously, professor. I am not blaming you for that. Though I do think they seem absolutely incredible.

[...]

And from the didactic point of view, it would be advisable not to tell the students such stories”, he added.<sup>135</sup>

In the quoted fragment of *Bal* – by Kazimierz Kummer who died well before his time – one can see that a story about Lagers could fulfil an educative function, but only upon removing from it any drastic “fragments”, correcting one’s memory of it. That was because the goal was not to answer what it was like, but what can be used from the past. The minds of the young generation must be built and developed using a positive message. A Lager – something that both communist officials and regular citizens understood well – did not exist outside the contexts. The political, moral, and socially normative perspectives were supposed to be points of reference, markers for the verification of the truth about the camps.

In the background of such discussions, there lurks a well-known fact: the receiver – even the most empathic one – will never be able to penetrate and understand what a first-degree witness experienced. She/he knows the events from accounts: journals, stories, novels, documentaries, and fictional films. “To understand that what is someone else’s is [...] a radically different less painful task than to understand that which is their own, than understanding oneself”.<sup>136</sup> Those

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>135</sup> K. Kummer, “Bal” [in:] *ibid.*, *Namiętności*, Gdańsk–Bydgoszcz 1972, p. 111.

<sup>136</sup> P. Filipkowski, “O (nie)możliwym nonkonformizmie w instytucji totalnej. Od doświadczenia obozowego do teorii socjologicznej (i z powrotem)”, *Stan Rzeczy* 2015, issue 2, p. 104.

are – putting it plainly – different stories about the world, different strategies for expressing and experiencing it.

### Instead of conclusions

Instead of recapitulating, let me once more pose the question about the themes awaiting their researchers. This time I do not mean the problems omitted due to their sensitive nature. This area results from “oversights”, not ideological pressure.

The missing links in the study of Auschwitz include, e.g. a monograph discussing the Lager motif in Polish drama. That would mean a synthesis of Lager-themed drama, like the one Grzegorz Niziołek prepared on the Shoah theatre.<sup>137</sup> *Notabene*, Niziołek’s publication, in principle, omitted the image of the Holocaust in drama concentrating on theatre plays.

Apart from the previously mentioned – traditional in terms of its form – *Puste pole* by Hołuj, one could also list *Jaselka moderne* by Ireneusz Ireduński. Niziołek compared that work to another grand text: *Akropolis* directed by Jerzy Grotowski. Grotowski, similarly to Ireduński who relocated a Christmas nativity play to a barrack, placed a play by Stanisław Wyspiański within the reality of an extermination centre.<sup>138</sup> In *Jaselka moderne* their author “seemed to construct something resembling a mocking (anti-)mystery play perversely reminding the readers about the lost metaphysical horizon”.<sup>139</sup> When demanding a metaphysical horizon, Ireduński chose a path of provocation. His transposition of the Biblical message may result in the reader’s mistrust. Though it might seem surprising, in a feud between Borowski and Kossak, the author of *Manipulacja* should be listed among the allies of Kossak. More precisely, Ireduński – possessing a non-orthodox anti-martyrological tradition of discussing the world of the concentration camp – portrayed the world devoid of religious sensitivity. Unlike in Borowski’s works, *Jaselka moderne* reacted to that insufficiency of the metaphysical by opposing it and not with a withdrawn acceptance.

The group of original approaches to the Lager theme includes *Wergili* by Stanisław Grochowiak. Auschwitz was clad there in a mythical-religious attire. In that case as well it was stripped of the noble aura.<sup>140</sup>

Obviously those are just two examples, though poignant and distinguishing among others, yet offering a good view of the whole. How big is that group of texts? It is difficult to determine. To answer such a question, one would have to

<sup>137</sup> G. Niziołek, *Polski teatr Zagłady*, Warsaw 2013.

<sup>138</sup> Z. Majchrowski, “«Po co to całe okrucieństwo?»” [in:] I. Ireduński, *Kreacja. Dramaty*, Warsaw 2014.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>140</sup> More on this topic, vide A. R. Burzyńska, “Wobec historii”, [in:] *ibid.*, *Maska twarzy. Twórczość dramatyczna Stanisława Grochowiaka*, Krakow 2011, pp. 229–278.

conduct an extensive library survey. The most complete list of drama (including foreign language drama) the plots of which were located in camp reality, has been offered by Morawiec.<sup>141</sup>

The notion of grotesque in camp writings has not yet received a general study. Is the fact that it is “dangerous” – as it sometimes seems to be breaking the principle of appropriateness – is the only explanation of that research gap? I do not think that in its case the concern related to the analysis of “dangerous topics” could be responsible for the silence. It is rather a result of an oversight or negligence. Thus it seems necessary to call for a study of the place of grotesque, irony, dark humour, and the related variants of comicality in camp writings:

The resulting conclusion for a researcher of war and occupation literature is [...] that by discussing comical texts of that time one must ask not only about what is being mocked or what goals it fulfils within a given convention (parody, grotesque, humoresque), but also in what way it relates to the negative force of the wartime experience or how it participates in seeking “positive” messages aimed at preventing the return to the wartime experiences.<sup>142</sup>

“Laughter in hell” – its sources, forms, and functions – still require thorough study. The theme has not been studied completely. In the fundamental and first of its kind monograph *Oświęcim nieznany*, its authors thus explained the silence surrounding the “laughter in hell”.

It was generally thought that by studying camp humour, one would offend the suffering and martyrology of the internees, undermine the seriousness of the entire issue of extermination, and suggest that the extermination locations were not, in fact, the terrible torture sites and death factories they were, since one could laugh there and tell each other funny anecdotes and jokes. [...] Another [...] important cause was the unwillingness of former internees to evoke the recollections of unnatural pathological circumstances which accompanied laughter in the camp, and even today if recalled, they produce not amusement, but the contrary: sudden rush of emotions and tears.<sup>143</sup>

Let us draw for an even more “dangerous” category: kitsch. Not only in the context of camp experience, but also in a broader, wartime, sense kitsch has not yet received a more thorough study. It is yet another example of a suppressed area.

The researchers agree that kitsch can only be discussed in the case of works of literature (fiction). It should not be applied to autobiographical non-fictional works, non-indirect authentic accounts from the world behind the barbed wire.

However, should one suspend all aesthetic judgements in the case of camp recollections? Is the avoidance of evaluation – more understandable when it applies to

<sup>141</sup> Vide A. Morawiec, *Literatura w lagrze, lager w literaturze*, p. 156. One must agree with the researcher – the Lager theme in drama does not constitute a large group of texts.

<sup>142</sup> T. Mizerkiewicz, “Doświadczenie i komizm – o literaturze wojenno-okupacyjnej” [in:] *ibid.*, *Nić śmieszego. Studia o komizmie o literaturze polskiej XX i XIX wieku*, Poznań 2007, p. 107.

<sup>143</sup> Z. Jagoda, S. Kłodziński, J. Masłowski, “Śmiech w piekle” [in:] *Oświęcim nieznany*, Kraków 1981, p. 137.

people who are in no means associated with the art of the word – always desired and necessary? Where does the reserve of researchers and regular readers towards any attempts at evaluation come from? It was/has been a result of the unique status of Nazi KLs – the extent of the crimes committed there and the experienced suffering. To answer that I shall first consider the reason why we forgo any evaluations of *how* camp reality has been reflected in recollections, memoirs, and accounts. It was the concern for offending the memory of the victims. The cognitive status and the documentary strength of each account of a witness (particularly if recorded *hic et nunc*) seem to question all demand for subjecting that type of writings to aesthetic evaluation. I do not believe it could prevent us from identifying weaknesses, and picking up on unoriginal elements. It has also been significant that the notion of kitsch is indispensably associated with the zone of pop-cultural trumpery, poor quality, and catering to low taste. However, in the case of camp testimonies, such a situation does not occur. It is not catering to low taste but the author's lack of skills that is responsible for the tackiness entering the accounts on the world of Nazi Lagers. If one can apply the category of graphomania to autobiographic texts centring on other areas of human experience, then why one should not use it for camp accounts. In fact, it does not always apply to the entire accounts, sometimes just individual (shorter or longer) passages.

A major challenge that Polish literary studies on Shoah face is the creation of a dictionary of Holocaust topics. The same, though to a smaller material extent, applies to poetry and prose on camps. A thorough analysis of camp topics would surely provide material for a considerably sized academic dissertation. The construction of a network of appropriate dictionary entries would be possible upon studying not only literary works, but also the works of film, photography, drawing, painting, and pop culture phenomena.

A laborious tracing of recurring motifs in various areas of art is not the only difficulty that future researchers of the area will face. It would also be necessary to separate camp and Holocaust topics. It seems unclear whether it will be possible in that case to achieve the necessary genealogical clarity and offer a distinct stratification. One of the obstacles is the reception of Shoah. For a long time the society, state dignitaries, scientists, and artists viewed it as an integral component of the Lager experience (for at least the past two decades its uniqueness has, obviously, been considered widely accepted).

Some topics developed at the borderline between two areas – those are the fragments of Holocaust literature and camp literature. Indeed, where should one situate DEATH TRAINS and a CREMATORIUM. Even though they offer a surplus term for the Jewish ordeal, yet one cannot state that they only belong to it. DEATH TRAINS also transported people of other nations, and the first considerable national group murdered in makeshift, at that time, gas chambers and CREMATORIUMS consisted Soviet POWs.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Vide S. Buryła, “Topika Holocaustu – wstępne rozpoznanie” [in:] *ibid.*, *Wokół Zagłady. Szkice o literaturze Holocaustu*, Krakow 2016.

The creation of a dictionary of Lager topics until 1989 was hindered by historical-political considerations (the role of censorship). It is only the current state of our knowledge in combination with an open access to libraries, archives, and the freedom of academic study that has enabled a more thorough consideration. There is another modifying factor: the arrival of young authors who were born long after WWII. That applies to both, writers and the representatives of the academia. A new cognitive perspective does not ensure the emergence of original works by default, though it offers a chance for a different viewpoint.

Also, researchers face both an opportunity and a challenge brought about by new methodologies. They are becoming increasingly popular in the studies of the Holocaust, as well as in camp writings. Apart from the dynamically developing gender studies, there appear others. *Animal studies* were already raised when I discussed the original monograph by Krupiński. Another path has been marked out by a book by Bożena Shallcross entitled *Rzeczy i Zagłada*. Similarly to Krupiński's work, Shallcross's insightful texts may cause surprise among those who approach with concern to modern attempts at discussing and writing about the "time of contempt". The material analysis of Lager accounts and the focus on the coexistence of people and items constitute yet another more substantial area of research.<sup>145</sup> They can lead us to some unexpected regions. For example when in one go they free the researchers from the traps of the *linguistic turn* and the well-known dilemmas of representation:

By operating within the framework of an institution known as the museum or a memorial site, the material remnants, to a large extent subject to the decisions and ideas of the curators, constitute one of the most tangible points of reference for Shoah. Its factual nature is communicated through the language of the items that were left after it, especially if one respects their individual characters [...]. In fact, ordinary and the most utilitarian items have been endowed with a unique ability to represent as in them there are inscribed various stories from Shoah.<sup>146</sup>

One cannot avoid the emergence in the last few decades of *oral history*. Filipkowski took priority in Polish studies devoted to Nazi KLs. His *Historia mówiona i wojna* constituted the foundation work for the basic study of Lagers. If the gender and feminist perspectives offer specific interpretative approaches, *oral history* offers sources without which any interpretation would not be possible to begin with. It offers opportunity for a new approach to sources:

Oral history provides a source quite similar in character to published autobiography, but much wider in scope. The overwhelming majority of published autobiographies are from a restricted group of political, social, and intellectual leaders, [...]. Oral historians, by contrast, may

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<sup>145</sup> Vide an interesting analysis of a story by Kornel Filipowicz entitled *Misja doktora Meyera* in an article by A. Dauksza entitled "Przenajświętsza Materia. O kolekcjonerstwie i zbieractwie w pisarstwie Kornela Filipowicza", *Teksty Drugie* 2012, issue 4.

<sup>146</sup> B. Shallcross, "Rzecz stotalizowana. Wstęp", [in:] *Rzeczy i Zagłada*, p. 7.



choose precisely whom to interview and what to ask about. The interview will provide, too, a means of discovering written documents and photographs which would not have otherwise been traced.<sup>147</sup>

*Oral history* performs shifts of themes and research areas. They lead towards a higher appreciation of minority and suppressed narratives. They record voices from outside the centre. Paul Thompson concluded: “The political historian can approach the voter at home or at work; and can hope to understand even the working-class conservative, who produced no newspapers or organisations for investigation”.<sup>148</sup> The mentioned attributes of *oral history* also emerge in the studies of camp themes.

In this study, I focussed on prose testimonies (of the belles lettres and memoir character) from within the group of the so-called high culture. I did not raise the issue of the huge and dynamically growing area of representations of the Lager in pop culture. That explication-rich group of phenomena deserves a synthetic approach as well as analyses of specific selected issues. Studies concerning WWII and Shoah in the context of the transformations of the contemporary consumer culture still constitute a major intellectual challenge.<sup>149</sup>

In the only Polish holistic study of the “pop version” of the Holocaust – unfortunately not free of stylistic awkwardness, many issues with its composition, and repetitions or even trivial observations – Marek Kaźmierczak stated:

In popular culture, there occur multiple reductions of the complexity of the Holocaust to images mimicking the past, selected motifs, narrative patterns, texts instrumentally describing people and their stories as well as to simplified visions which make memory almost unrealistic or unnatural.<sup>150</sup>

That applies not only to genres associated with the “low taste” (e.g. comics). Alvin Rosenfeld thus described the environment in which contemporary memory of Shoah functions:

The historical nature of the crimes were call the Holocaust is open to change under the pressures of a wide range of cultural factors, including political opportunism, commercial profit, and

<sup>147</sup> P. Thompson, “Głos przeszłości. Historia mówiona”, trans. M. Kierzkowski, [in:] *Teoria wiedzy o przeszłości na tle współczesnej humanistyki. Antologia*, E. Domańska (ed.), Poznań 2010, p. 286. [English version as in: Thompson Paul, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford University Press: Oxford 2000]

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288.

<sup>149</sup> A separate, and partly discussed, phenomenon are the artistic games and transformations of the icons of mass imagination performed in the works of Zbigniew Libera and Artur Żmijewski. The so-called critical art and WWII have received many studies. Vide, e.g. I. Kowalczyk, *Podróż w przeszłość. Interpretacje najnowszej historii w polskiej sztuce krytycznej*, Warsaw 2010; K. Bojarska, *Sztuka, która krzywdzi?*

<sup>150</sup> M. Kaźmierczak, *Auschwitz w Internecie. Przedstawienia Holokaustu w kulturze popularnej*, Poznań 2012, p. 81.

popular tastes and preferences. [...] And when some people live with a sense of a necessity to remember, for others memory is not the highest duty. For others yet the temptation to use the suffering from the Nazi times in a given moment for personal or political benefit is so high that it cannot be overcome.<sup>151</sup>

If one adds to it the Internet community together with its extremely rich spectrum of transformations that are applied to the Lager theme, the result is an ocean of problems requiring discussion. It would not be an overstatement that the theme currently constitutes in pop culture the most extensive area of academic study as it transcends literature. The literary message is not dominant within the group of Internet uses of the theme.

The final matter without discussing which one cannot actually talk about the zones of silence in domestic Lager prose is communist censorship. In the PRL, however controversial and surprising it might seem, institutional censorship safeguarded the theme from “abuse”. The Chief Control Bureau for Press, Publications and Performances (GUKPPiW), though it might seem incredible, often fulfilled the role of a protector of morality. In the case of such a sensitive topic as the Nazi torment sites, censorship officials displayed particular vigilance towards any attempts at violating the existing social contract. Today, no one can offer any final judgements regarding two major issues: 1) What were the actual interventions of GUKPPiW in the impressive group of writings raising the topic of lagers? 2) Whether, and if yes, what texts were seized and prohibited from being printed? One cannot discuss the holistically approached issue of covering with silence and suppressing while omitting censorship files and its role in the shaping of the perception of Auschwitz and other camps. A visit to the Archives of New Records, where GUKPPiW documents are collected, could help settle many questions. For example, one of the most basic ones: what is the actual scope of the “blank spots” in Lager literature.

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Filipkowski in *Historia mówiona i wojna* mentioned distortions which throughout the decades have accumulated around Auschwitz and other sites of the mass extermination of Jews, i.e. the fact of denying their Jewish character. They are to a large extent behind us. Yet, there are other tasks before us:

In the meantime, the story of non-Jewish non-Holocaust camp experience [...] has remained the “old” story from “that” post-WWII period. Told at some point in the past by political prisoners and located within a different culture of memory. And which today is rather too difficult to listen to. The language in which they learnt to describe it is no longer understood. It all seems

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<sup>151</sup> A. H. Rosenfeld, *Kres Holokaustu*, p. 35.

well-known, academically worn out, and unattractive or outdated for research. Therefore, there do not seem to be many of those will to stop at the camp experience at least for a moment. And there are even fewer of those who tried to tell it anew – using a more contemporary, possibly better understood language.<sup>152</sup>

Being historians, sociologists, and philosophers and specialists in lager issues we are faced with the necessity to present the experience we had studied anew. It is the same task as the one with which we need to cope when we think about many other aspects of the occupation and WWII. It requires a fresh perspective and new methodologies to bring the zones of silence to the light. This time, though, those are not areas which had been covered with silence intentionally, rather which can speak only now when we possess new research tools and new historical knowledge.

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**Lager – literature – zones of silence**

(Summary)

The article reconstructs the most important issues on the map of Polish lager prose, those that are ignored, inconvenient for readers or authors, and sometimes for both. The author of the essay also presents the zones of silence that resulted not from the threat of violation of social taboos and political prohibitions, but from the negligence of researchers. They characterize the most important tasks faced by scholars of Polish lager prose.

**Key words:** Lager; Polish lager prose; zones of silence