

Piotr Krupiński\*

## “Birdless Sky”. On one of the topoi in Lager literature (and its fringes)

*How is it... Remember... Birds are flying in late fall...  
Long long flocks. Our artillery and the Germans' is  
firing, and they're flying. How to call out to them?  
How to warn them: "Not here! There's shooting here!"  
How?! The birds are falling, falling to the ground...  
S. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*<sup>1</sup>*

I could define the task I have undertaken in this study as a special type of archaeology. One which, being supported by the moving foundation of re-reading selected Lager accounts, will attempt to recreate – as much as possible – one of the aspects of the sense of the world of the people interned behind the wires of German concentration camps (as my study will be devoted mostly to KLs). When engaging in my search, I would like to direct the vector of attention towards that which for understandable reasons has remained less, if at all, exposed.

From the very first moments upon the liberation of the Lagers (or even prior to that) historians who studied the concentration universe were forced to “secure the traces”, or, in other words, with the utmost care recreate the origins of Nazi concentration camps, and mass extermination camps, their internal organisation, and, most of all, the living and dying conditions of the male and female internees. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that within thus designed reconstruction, a detailed analysis should apply to the system of violence, the catalogue of regulation and non-regulation penalties and harassment to which the internees were subjected, the issue of food or rather starvation camp rations, clothing available to the camp population, as well as the conditions of the accommodation they were forced to endure.

Bearing in mind those intersecting areas which utterly determined the Lager fate, in my discussion, as I have indicated, I shall attempt to raise the topic which

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\* Associate Professor; Chair of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Polish Literature and Culture, Institute of Polish Studies and Culture Studies, Faculty of Philology, University of Szczecin; [krupier10@wp.pl](mailto:krupier10@wp.pl).

<sup>1</sup> S. Alexievich, *Wojna nie ma w sobie nic z kobiecy*, trans. J. Czech, Wołowiec 2015, p. 148. [English version: Alexievich, S. *The Unwomanly Face of War*. New York 2017]

until now has been absent, or was found at the farthest reaches of historical and literary history reflection on camp writings. I could state that I, being a researcher of this extremely diverse literary constellation, have been faced with a paradoxical challenge; in trying to add another element to the slowly emerging glossary of the topics of Lager and Holocaust writings<sup>2</sup> (even though those areas are disjunctive, “their division line is not one which is easily defined”),<sup>3</sup> I intend to focus not on that which **is** in literature, but on that which exists as a lack of something, a gap, the only rarely exposed reverse side. In continuing the paradox game, I shall stress once more that I shall be intrigued by the intense presence of absence, “active fading”,<sup>4</sup> because that is how, to put it concisely, one should understand the title “empty sky”, “birdless sky”, a sky which became speechless and silent...

### I. Where birds do not sing?

That peculiar figure in Lager literature reappears with surprising regularity; it can be found – it even appeared twice in the titles! – i.a. in the recollections of Seweryna Szmaglewska, Zofia Posmysz, Karolina Lanckorońska, Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk, and Janina Fabierkiewicz-Szyrkowa. I shall quote two examples in this text:

The corpses of the executed were burnt in the crematorium, which was adjacent to the high, probably five-metre-tall wall which surrounded the camp. The stack of the crematorium was higher than the wall, and the wind blew the smoke between the blocks – a reddish sickly smoke reeking of burnt bone. The stench has remained with me ever since. I think it scared off birds, because what other reason could there be for there not to ever be a bunch of quarrelling sparrows or swishing swallows? Sometimes there would only appear falcons circling high above, as if a symbol of our masters. And the camp was located between forests, on a lake, and it would seem that there should be a multitude of the winged crowd; even more so that there was enough refuse in our “town” of fifty thousand;<sup>5</sup>

So when this part of the camp was overcome by the lunch silence, we sneaked out through the kitchen exit, and we dropped in a tuft of weed and sharp grass where blooming sow thistles yellowed as if scattered school paints.

<sup>2</sup> I am referring to the studies conducted by Sławomir Buryła (vide *ibid.*, “Topika Holokaustu. Wstępne rozpoznanie”, in: *Wokół Zagłady. Szkice o literaturze Holokaustu*, Krakow 2016; *Tematy [nie]opisane*, Krakow 2013; “Pociągi śmierci – kilka uwag o konstrukcji hasła słownikowego”, *Narracje o Zagładzie* 2016, issue 2), and the Holocaust Remembrance Research Team, Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw (vide *Ślady Holokaustu w imaginariu kultury polskiej*, J. Kowalska-Leder [et al.] (eds.), Warsaw 2017). The Holocaust *topoi* was also the main theme of the monographic issue of *Narracje o Zagładzie* (2016, issue 2).

<sup>3</sup> S. Buryła, “Monografia po latach”, *Teksty Drugie* 2009, issue 5, p. 104.

<sup>4</sup> I borrowed Jean Baudrillard’s concept. Vide *ibid.*, *Spisek sztuki*, foreword S. Lotringer, trans. S. Królak, Warsaw 2006, p. 46. [English version translated from Polish]

<sup>5</sup> J. Fabierkiewicz-Szyrkowa, *Gdzie nie śpiewały ptaki*, Warsaw 1972, pp. 86–87. [English version translated from Polish]

We lay there without lifting our heads so that the Germans couldn't see us, and we took in the tangy scent of the herbs.

I suddenly recalled, somewhere there still must be some meadows full of soft grass, king-cups, and fuzzy intoxicating wild carnations buzzing with bees and bumblebees.

Yet I sought to no avail the scent of the earth, even though in Majdanek we dug it over deeply many times, still flinging out shovels. It did not smell of a good life-giving soil. It was dry, without its oily shine, as if it was also drained of life, becoming barren. And the sky above it without any birds which would be seeking food to no avail.<sup>6</sup>

Already at this stage of the discussion it should be stressed that, first of all, it was women who more often indicated that special feature of the “stone world”, and, secondly, note that the listed authors were interned at different camps: Birkenau, Majdanek, Ravensbrück, which clearly suggests that the phenomenon stated above was of a supra-local nature, and was independent of such objective, it would seem, factors as the relief or the broadly understood natural conditions, in which the Germans decided to locate specific camps. Yet the issue being discussed will become somewhat complicated further when one notices that the traces of that figure, i.e. “a birdless sky”, or “a sky filled with fowls which obstinately keeps its silence”, can also be found outside the studied writings. For example, in the accounts from the besieged Leningrad,<sup>7</sup> in contemporary descriptions of the forest concealing the graves of the victims of the Katyn massacre,<sup>8</sup> or even, let us move the hands of the historical clock forward, in the eye-witness account from the crash site of the Polish government plane in Smolensk.<sup>9</sup>

If one bears that synchronisation in mind, it might be the case that the images of areas where “birds never sing” established in culture can actually be assigned the status of *loci communes*, yet those will be the locations of so capacious a community in order for it to hold various types of historical experiences. What could combine the resulting narratives? Surely the strongly martyrologised indelible trace of the transforming mental shock experienced by the observing entity, yet it seems that we should consider something else as well. Something which in short could be defined as a hyperbolic feature of the referenced testimonies, a special rhetorical addition supposed to articulate the disturbing truth: in the face of crimes which surpass human imagination, no one and nothing should remain indifferent. That would also apply to nature, including its important emissaries: birds.

<sup>6</sup> D. Brzosko-Mędryk, *Niebo bez ptaków*, Warsaw 1969, p. 193.

<sup>7</sup> B. Pawletko, *Blokada Leningradu i jej reprezentacje w świetle innych doświadczeń granicznych*, Katowice 2016, pp. 192–193.

<sup>8</sup> I am referring to a radio report by Jan Kasia regarding a group visiting the graves of Polish officers murdered in Kharkiv. Vide *Tam, gdzie nie śpiewają ptaki* [online], <http://www.polskieradio.pl/9/325/Artykul/219711,Tam-gdzie-nie-spiewaja-ptaki-Reportaz-Jana-Kasi> [accessed on: 15.03.2017]. Aired: Polish Radio Three.

<sup>9</sup> *Tam nawet ptaki nie śpiewają. 5. rocznica katastrofy smoleńskiej* [online], <http://czestochowskie24.pl/czestochowa/45350/> [accessed on: 15.03.2017].

Therefore, within the background of the camp accounts presented, there would glow a subconscious conviction, a special form of presupposition based on – to use a certain anachronism, if you will – Adorno’s model. Narrators would place their traumatic experiences within such historic disasters after which one would wish to “forbid the birds from singing, flowers from blooming, and the sun from shining”.<sup>10</sup> Some light from another side will be shed on the problem by the title of the (quasi)autobiographical notes by Joseph Horace “Jim” Greasley,<sup>11</sup> an English POW, who during WWII became famous for his many escapes from Oflags. *Do the Birds Still Sing in Hell?*

Let us remain for a moment at the threshold of the Dantesque vision characteristic of Lager literature in which the tightening grasp of war-time oppression – materialised in the form of a dense network of Stalags, Oflags, slave labour camps, concentration camps, and death camps – is compared to the consecutive circles of Earthly inferno.<sup>12</sup> Inferno, or hell, also considered as a place to which one can descend, but from which there is no, and there should not be any, return. That somewhat metaphysical vision could partly overlap the Nazi plan of *Endlösung*, understood as an event which according to the intention of the designers of the genocide was supposed to be entirely free of any witnesses.<sup>13</sup> The fact that the Machiavellian project did not eventually succeed was mainly thanks to the survivors, and those who, even though they did not survive themselves, managed to leave their testimonies. It seems there is one more, a much bigger, group of witnesses, which should include people who voluntarily migrated deep into the Nazi “heart of darkness.” This time I am not referring to the famous Rittmeister Witold Pilecki, but another (apart from Joseph Greasley) English POW, who, like the legendary Polish officer, became famous as “the man who sneaked into Auschwitz”.<sup>14</sup> In quoting a fragment of his memoir, I would like to, for the

<sup>10</sup> J. Makowski, *Czy po Auschwitz da się jeszcze pisać wiersze?* [online], <http://makowski.blog.polityka.pl/2015/01/27/czy-po-auschwitz-da-sie-jeszcze-pisac-wiersze/> [accessed on: 15.03.2017]. [English version translated from Polish]

<sup>11</sup> H. Greasley, K. Scott, *Do the Birds Still Sing in Hell?*, London 2013. Polish translation: H. Greasley, *Czy w piekle ptaki nadal śpiewają? Prawdziwa historia człowieka, który stawiał czoła nazistom. Wszystko z miłości do kobiety*, trans. O. Kwiecień, Gliwice 2015.

<sup>12</sup> This is yet another example of a similar reference in Lager-related prose: “How was I supposed to know? Who could’ve guessed, sensed it? She didn’t know anything about it either, until she got here. No one normal could have imagined that. Dante, Kafka, Čapek? Those visions were too general, they did not include the details or the torment of indescribable length of the torture. Maybe the mediaeval painters of the netherworld came close to the truth painting those swirls of bodies pressed into a square decimetre of the canvas as if tadpoles in small urban ponds?” Z. Posmysz, *Ten sam doktor M*, Warsaw 1981, p. 185. [English version translated from Polish]

<sup>13</sup> Cf. D. Laub, “Zdarzenie bez świadka: prawda, świadectwo oraz ocalenie”, trans. T. Łysak, *Teksty Drugie* 2007, issue 5.

<sup>14</sup> Vide D. Avey, R. Broomby, *Człowiek, który wkradł się do Auschwitz*, trans. R. Palewicz, Krakow 2011.

first time in this study, focus on the particularly significant though rarely noticed symmetry, the traces of which can be found on the pages of Lager and Holocaust writings. Within that analogy, the Holocaust would be subject to a peculiar multiplication, somewhat splitting into two mutually complementing instances: genocide and ecocide:<sup>15</sup>

I knew by now that this was no ordinary labour camp. They were deliberately worked to death. It was hell on earth. Hell on earth. There was no grass, no greenery of any sort, just mud in winter, dust in summer. Nature – not to mention the Grand Architect himself – had abandoned that place. I never saw a butterfly, a bird or a bee the whole time I was there.<sup>16</sup>

Evidently, the vibrating silence of the birds was interpreted by the victims of Nazi violence at least in two ways. While one of those, somewhat deflected “outwards”, would emphasise the process of environmental degradation which accompanied the extermination of human beings, the previously unknown forms of biological collapse based on which the Auschwitz experience could be viewed not only as a “gap in the history”,<sup>17</sup> but also as an unfillable crater within the human-nature relationship, the other would rather be inclined towards the human mind. In the case of the latter, man, as a deeply hurt holder of meanings, would strive to introduce the alphabet of her/his suffering into the writings of the nature surrounding her/him. To put it less metaphorically, one could say that the final result of self-reflection made under the influence of the extreme circumstances imposed by history was often a deeply interiorised conviction: in the face of the terror of such unimaginable crimes as mass executions, ethnic cleansing, or genocide, what also needs to change permanently is the manner in which one perceives nature. As a result of such transformations, nature would cease to be a neutral backdrop for the “dirty deeds” committed by man, and it would become a significant actor, someone, let me stress this, who actively participates in the war-time *horrendum*. Someone who could and should be expected to offer a moral reaction. If one actually lifts that way the anthropocentric perspective, it becomes obvious that nature would begin to appear as a forgotten (hidden) victim of human aggression on the one hand, and, on the other, and that is a much rarer case, as a speechless witness of immoral human actions, a witness whose voice must be mediated through the power of human matter. One could also indicate relationships in which both roles, i.e. of the victim and the witness, are organically intertwined. That would occur, for example, in the case of the multivocal novel/oratory by Svetlana Alexievich quoted at the beginning of this study. The following is a fragment thereof:

<sup>15</sup> Cf. A. Ubertowska, “Natura u kresu (ekocyd)”, *Teksty Drugie* 2013, issue 1–2.

<sup>16</sup> D. Avey, *Człowiek, który wkradł się do Auschwitz...* [English version: Avey D., Broomby R. *The Man Who Broke into Auschwitz*. Boston 2011]

<sup>17</sup> That, of course, is an allusion to the well-known maxim by Emmanuel Lévinas.

I remember one time. We came to a village and there were some dead partisans lying near a forest. What they had done to them I can't tell you, my heart won't bear it. They had been cut up into pieces. They were trussed like pigs. They lay there and horses were grazing not far away. They must have been the partisans' horses; they even had saddles. Either they had escaped from the Germans and then come back, or the Germans hadn't managed to take them away. I don't know. They didn't go far. There was a lot of grass. I thought: how could those people do such things in front of horses? In front of animals. The horses had watched them...<sup>18</sup>

It should be reiterated that it is no coincidence that it was women's memory that stored for us that type of shocking image – scenes within which the nodes of human suffering are intertwined with the harm done to animals, plants, and the landscape. When viewed through a woman's eyes, war, the concentration camp, and the Holocaust not only would open in front of us “another version of history”, but would also have, as the Belarusian Nobel Prize winner noted aptly in one interview, a different scent, and colour. Would they also have a different sound? If through a type of a negative to the Lager “soundscape” one also considered those tones which have been so emphatically missing, thus one could interpret the silence of the birds, a silence so often recalled by Polish female internees.

When considering from different sides the mystery of a Lager's “birdless sky”, at some point one must inquire about the degree of the (inevitable?) conventionalisation of the analysed presentations, their deeply rooted topical potential. Thus formulated doubt has to cause a significant reorientation of our searches, as one can speculate whether that which in fact we are trying to reconstruct are the relationships between human and extra-human worlds – grasped within the perspectives of those held behind the wires – or whether the only thing to which we possess actual access is the manner in which those relationships influenced the shifting framework of internee memory. Or, which, of course, cannot be excluded, some special form of projection, as a result of which there would occur an involuntary distortion of the image of reality recorded in Lager accounts. If one thus shifts the emphases, it would be necessary to consider whether the ornithological void diagnosed within camp writings functions as a paradoxical trace of the former presence, revealing to readers, as seen by those immersed, a fragment of the world which even though so deeply unreal, was nonetheless the real world, or maybe... Or maybe it is actually quite the opposite. Then that which we are used to classifying as a reflection of a mimetic effect, as a narrational trace of ethical obligation to offer the fullest testimony of truth, would partly give way to the special type of (self)illusion, as a result of which, the so intriguing for us image of a silent landscape would say (say by staying silent) more on the internal condition of the collective subject of our narratives than about their object, the world, which would not be subject to “suspension”.

<sup>18</sup> S. Alexievich, *Wojna nie ma w sobie nic z kobiety...*, p. 147.

Quite unexpectedly, then, the question about the flickering presence of avi-fauna in Lager writings must transform into an element of one of the fundamental disputes regarding the literature of a testimony as a narrative whole. Raising our eyes together with KL female internees, closely observing the drab expanse of the sky over the camp – because that would be, to some extent, our reading, the variant of “archaeological view” missed by the author of *Discipline and Punish* – we would at the same time come closer to the thin moving line which separates that which is *actual, objective* from that which would result from a clearly different order.<sup>19</sup> One within which a bird would lead a double literary life: without ceasing to be a representative of the winged group of vertebrates, one of the truly few creatures which voluntarily came into the camp orbit, it would make its mark as a symbol of values of which the Lager community was brutally deprived. I am referring, obviously, to unbridled freedom, or the so suggestively described by Gaston Bachelard<sup>20</sup> ease of traversing space, and transcending all types of barriers and borders. Including that most important, impassable, defined by the electric wire.

Thus, the bird would join the considerable group of animals which, within Lager and Holocaust literatures (or even in the reverse order), happen to play a special, and in my opinion most exceptional, role. On the one hand, they would constitute, like the famous Lanzmann’s hare,<sup>21</sup> the unreachable reverse of the condition of those interned at concentration camps, ghettos, prisons,<sup>22</sup> and, on the other, that would be exactly why they would become part of the alluring dream or phantasm, within which the lines between biological species would gradually blur. The record of that peculiar zoomorphic effect, a fantasy about the only form of escape that could be guaranteed by the rejection of a human (Jewish) body, and one’s transfiguration into an animal body could be considered as an important microtopos of camp and Holocaust writings. The following are three examples; two include a moving shadow of the (Lager) birds I am so interested in in this study:

I was envious of mice and rats—they were not as helpless as we were that night in the horrible Umschlag, as we waited for the train to the death and torture camp! Mice and rats had their

<sup>19</sup> In this context, it is worth referring to the classical study by Hayden White. Vide *ibid.*, *Realizm figuralny w literaturze świadectwa*, trans. E. Domańska, in: *ibid.*, *Proza historyczna*, trans. R. Borysławski [et al.], Krakow 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Vide G. Bachelard, “Poetyka skrzydeł”, trans. A. Tatarkiewicz, in: *ibid.*, *Wyobraźnia poetycka. Wybór pism*, trans. H. Chudak, A. Tatarkiewicz, foreword J. Błoński, Warsaw 1975.

<sup>21</sup> I am referring to a well-known fragment of a film entitled *Shoah*. I discussed the issue in more detail in a book: „Dlaczego geśi krzyczały?”. *Zwierzęta i Zagłada w literaturze polskiej XX i XXI wieku*, Warsaw 2016 (ch. “Sarny w Birkenau”).

<sup>22</sup> A variant of such a self-identification of the interned would be the Enlightenment-natured comparison of one’s own condition to birds in... a cage, or birds which have been brutally deprived of the gift of flight. “Man in captivity becomes like a bird whose wings were broken. Such a bird usually dies”. M. Rutkowska-Kurcyszowa, *Kamyki Dawida. Wspomnienia*, Katowice 2005, p. 147. [English version translated from Polish]

holes, they could take cover from the enemy and danger. While we were not allowed to leave those rooms or even go to the privy,<sup>23</sup>

Sometimes over the camp there flew a few sparrows, sometimes a peewit, chirping, circling for a moment over our heads. Sick with longing we grasped with our eyes at their wings whispering jealously: “Oh, you lucky bird!”<sup>24</sup>

That was how we drew it, that was how it should be if it had been completely different, when our Sunday stroll was down a path between blocks, fifteen steps there, fifteen steps back, or along the wall bristling with wires, and so impenetrable that it was even strange to see how clouds and flocks of crows flew over it.<sup>25</sup>

To slowly conclude the first part of my discussion, within which the bird falteringly gravitated from a real creature to a cultural sign, directing our attention towards only partly concealed content, I should answer one more question. In fact, I was faced with a counterargument which can or even should appear at this point of my ornithological “investigation”. One could aptly inquire whether as a team of researchers, being an interpretative community, undertaking the reading of accounts of events which occurred over seven decades ago, we possess any instruments which could help us verify the unclear status of the figure that troubles us, i.e. “a birdless sky”. To discuss it with mimetic straightforwardness, one should ask: “were they there or not?”, or – against the *tertium non datur* principle – one should rather say: “were they, and **as if** they weren’t?” Nonetheless, we shall try to follow that trace vanishing in thin air.

## II. The life of birds in Auschwitz

The just indicated blurring of the perspective will increase even further when one conducts an important shift, a reshuffling within the framework of Hilberg’s triangle. This time I refer to a discovery made in the collections of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim. In the library of that exceptional museum one can find an extremely rare item, a *white raven* as it is metaphorically

<sup>23</sup> H. Birenbaum, *Nadzieja umiera ostatnia*, Warsaw 1988, p. 82. [English version translated from Polish]

<sup>24</sup> M. Plater-Skassa, “Wspomnienia”, in: *Ponad ludzką miarę. Wspomnienia operowanych z Ravensbrück*, introduction W. Kiedrzyńska, Warsaw 1969, p. 369. [English version translated from Polish]

<sup>25</sup> Z. Romanowiczowa, *Przejście przez Morze Czerwone*, Warsaw 1961, p. 83. [English version translated from Polish] As a side note to the above quote, one should note the important role played by animalistic motifs – the kinship between internees and animals in this case – in the Lager works of the writer (that issue was stressed by, e.g. Arkadiusz Morawiec – vide *ibid.*, *Zofia Romanowiczowa. Pisarka nie tylko emigracyjna*, Łódź 2016, p. 87). In one of her poems written behind the wires, the author confessed, somewhat anticipating the famous maxim by Edgar Kupfer-Koberwitz: “How little difference there is between me and deer and hares / My panicked brothers and my poor sisters...” (“Jest we mnie...”, in: *Ravensbrück. Wiersze obozowe*, W. Kiedrzyńska (ed.), Warsaw 1961, p. 36 [English version translated from Polish]).

referred to in Polish, which in this case could be understood almost literally. I am referring to a study entitled *Beobachtungen über die Vogelwelt von Auschwitz*,<sup>26</sup> by Günther Niethammer. That study was published in the darkest phase of WWII, i.e. in 1942 – which in itself would deserve a separate remark – in a Vienna-based academic journal *Annalen des Naturhistorischen Museums in Wien*. Niethammer, a valued German ornithologist, the future chairman of the German Ornithological Association, who in 1937 joined the SS,<sup>27</sup> and during WWII joined SS guard staff at KL Auschwitz, in the referenced article shared the results of his field study conducted in the camp, and within its immediate vicinity. May I add that the permit for temporary release from guard duty in order to fully commit to observing the local fowls was issued for the enlisted ornithologist by the camp commandant Rudolf Höss (for which the author did not fail to thank in the copy of his dissertation kept at the Museum). One also could not exclude the possibility that it was Niethammer who caused the issue of *The Special Order of the HQ* regarding, i.a. a ban on shooting birds within the area of the concentration camp in Auschwitz, and its immediate vicinity. That truly extraordinary story inspired the contemporary German prose writer Arno Surminski to write on its basis an unfortunately disappointing novel entitled *Die Vogelwelt von Auschwitz* (the novel was translated into Polish a few years ago).<sup>28</sup>

The very fact that in an academic article Niethammer listed over one hundred species of birds – yes, it is no error: over a hundred species (to anticipate some questions, the situation is slightly different in the novel “reflection” of that study) could indicate that the Oświęcim Basin, an interfluve, near the mouth of the Soła flowing into the Vistula, i.e. where the Germans had decided to place their most efficient death factory, from the perspective of a professional ornithologist could have seemed almost like a promised land.<sup>29</sup> It would appear, then, that all it would take was to change the perspective, give the voice to the oppressors (which is not,

<sup>26</sup> G. Niethammer, *Beobachtungen über die Vogelwelt von Auschwitz* [online], [http://www.zobodat.at/pdf/ANNA\\_52\\_0164-0199.pdf](http://www.zobodat.at/pdf/ANNA_52_0164-0199.pdf) [accessed on: 15.03.2017]. That which is striking when reading the dissertation is... its peculiar font. I am referring to the often recurring SS symbols inscribed using the graphemic counterpart of the Proto-Germanic runic script.

<sup>27</sup> I summarised this fragment of G. Niethammer’s biography based on Adam Cyra’s historical blog. Vide <http://cyra.wblogu.pl/swiat-ptakow-w-auschwitz.html> [accessed on: 15.03.2017]. The Nazi bird researcher was also recently referenced by Stanisław Łubieński in one of his essays. Vide *ibid.*, “Koniec świata nad Kinkeimer See”, in: *ibid.*, *Dwanaście srok za ogon*, Wołowiec 2016, p. 140.

<sup>28</sup> A. Surminski, *Życie ptaków w Auschwitz*, trans. R. Załuska, afterword M. Ossowski, Rzeszów 2011. Review B. Darska, *Ptaki mają lepiej niż ludzie* [online], <http://bernadettadarska.blog.onet.pl/2012/03/13/ptaki-maja-lepiej-niz-ludzie-a-surminski-zycie-ptakow-w-auschwitz/> [accessed on: 15.03.2017].

<sup>29</sup> NB, the specified area, i.e. the Valley of the Lower Soła, as being particularly valuable in terms of its nature and landscape, is today protected as a Natura 2000 area. Vide Catalogue of Natura 2000 areas [online], <http://obszary.natura2000.org.pl/index.php?s=obszar&id=463> [accessed on: 15.03.2017].

of course, an ethically neutral decision), who not only possessed an incomparably higher freedom of movement, but were also free from the most basic concerns to which the male and female KL internees were condemned, for the “birdless sky” to suddenly become filled with the fluttering of bird wings.

Obviously, if one was to consider such a radical change of perception, one would also have to bear in mind that too extensive a generalisation can lead, in this case, to false conclusions. In other words, the intensity of “the life of birds in Auschwitz” did not have to be, and it certainly was not equivalent to the comparably profuse life of birds in Majdanek, in Ravensbrück, or – and that is probably the most important point of reference – in the nearby Birkenau. Exactly that dichotomously forming space stretched between the primary camp complex of Auschwitz (KL Auschwitz I – Stammlager), and the kind of a “scar” left after the village of Brzezinka, where soon there was to be established the centre of mass extermination (Auschwitz II – Birkenau),<sup>30</sup> was used by Surminski as the dual place where the story of the novel I referred to earlier took place. That narrative – based on the intentionally blurry story of Niethammer (though the structure of the novel also includes many quotations from the ornithologist’s academic paper) – was founded on the multiplied contrast: surely even the juxtaposition of the carefree checking of birds’ nests, and the dying of millions of people right behind the wire would suffice as a visible dissonance, yet the German writer made sure that it did not exhaust the disharmonious logic. Exactly towards that effect the author introduced in the novel a dual narrational perspective, which included the point of view of the soldier-researcher, and his Polish assistant, a former student of the Academy of Fine Arts, internee Marek Rogalski (a completely fictional character), but the source of the contrast, as I have already mentioned, also became the space within which both men operated in the academic pursuit of fowls. The name which we have become accustomed to uttering at one gulp: Auschwitz-Birkenau, is divided there, and that which is the most significant – also in the context of the mystery of the “birdless sky” in question – occurs “in between”, within the space of the hyphen.

In order to fully appreciate the polar opposition between the two parts of the Lager complex (Auschwitz – Birkenau), a difference that cannot be reduced due to a seemingly surprising natural perspective, one should once again refer to the complicated beginnings and the evolution of the function (from concentration to extermination) which a significant part of the camp infrastructure was supposed to serve. While the “parent” part of the camp was placed within the area of pre-WWII barracks of the Polish Army, within the fork of the Vistula and the Soła exceptionally conducive to biodiversity for various reasons (as it was stated above),

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<sup>30</sup> To find out more about the origins of the camp: L. Rees, *Auschwitz. Naziści i „ostateczne rozwiązanie”*, trans. P. Stachura, introduction W. Bartoszewski, Warsaw 2009; *Auschwitz 1940–1945. Węzłowe zagadnienia z dziejów obozu*, vol. 1–4, W. Długoborski, F. Piper (eds.), Oświęcim–Brzezinka 1995.

Birkenau, the other camp within the KL Auschwitz complex, the construction of which was ordered by Heinrich Himmler in the autumn of 1941, formed in completely different conditions. It was precisely the never-ending process of creation, something which could be defined as a permanent *in statu nascendi*, that decided the character of that ghastly place, and mode of people’s presence there. One which could be referred to as the most basically understood being-towards-death if it had not been for the fact that, as has been posited by philosophers, at the Nazi death camps, the essence of death was excluded irretrievably; as a result people did not die, and while still alive (if, despite everything, one concedes to call it that way) they gradually transformed into corpses, a future object for disposal.<sup>31</sup> Birkenau, which in the accounts of many female internees was not without a reason metonymically compared to mud, an endless sea of mud,<sup>32</sup> would thus appear as a place hostile to all forms of life. That would also apply to forms of life other than human: plants and animals, including birds. Let me quote the author of the best known account from that place:

Birkenau in 1942. A marshy plain surrounded by electric wires. There are no roads or paths between the blocks. The entire camp has no water. There is no sewage disposal, a condition that prevailed to the very end. Garbage, excrement and rubbish lay around, foul and rotten. No bird ever flies low over Birkenau though, God knows, the prisoners strain their eyes to search the skies for them during the roll calls, which last for hours. Guided by smell or instinct, the birds avoid the place. Birkenau does not exist officially. Its name never appears in an address. It is Oswiecim II. From the way it is built you can see that it was not originally intended to hold people for any length of time. It is a kind of precrematorium waiting room, calculated for twenty to thirty thousand people.<sup>33</sup>

Could anyone blame the birds? If one inserted between the pages of *Smoke Over Birkenau* the photographs of that camp complex, photographs often actually taken from a bird’s perspective, one would realise even more emphatically (if, of course, one can suppress one’s anthropocentric reflexes) that it was not an area where, if one belonged to that class of animals, one would like to build a nest, or stop in-flight even for a moment’s rest or to look for food. An empty surface filled with numerous cuboids of buildings arranged with cruel precision. Barracks, workshops, latrines, internee property storage, crematoriums. An anti-landscape which could be associated with the well-known Czesław Miłosz quote: “Now there is only the earth, sandy, trodden down, / With one leafless tree”.<sup>34</sup> There is

<sup>31</sup> Vide G. Agamben, *Co zostaje z Auschwitz. Archiwum i świadek (Homo sacer III)*, trans. S. Królak, Warsaw 2008, p. 76.

<sup>32</sup> A. Kłos, “Znikająca pamięć Birkenau. Opowieść o sile przyrody”, „Opposite” [online], issue 3, <http://opposite.uni.wroc.pl/2012/klos.htm> [accessed on: 15.03.2017].

<sup>33</sup> S. Szmaglewska, *Dymy nad Birkenau*, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1975, p. 15. [English version: Szmaglewska, S. *Smoke Over Birkenau*. Kindle Edition 2015]

<sup>34</sup> C. Miłosz, “Biedny chrześcijanin patrzy na getto”, in: *ibid.*, *Wiersze*, Krakow–Wrocław 1985, vol. 1, p. 133. [English version: Miłosz, Cz. *Poezje Wybrane. Selected Poems*. Krakow 1996]

one more thing to consider, which, due to obvious reasons, no camera could have captured. Camp air! The way in which it became etched in internees' memory, its smell,<sup>35</sup> texture, taste even, would surely deserve a separate discussion. I shall only quote a fragment, this time regarding a different camp but in which crematorium furnaces worked day and night as well:

The black clouds of smoke continuously rising from the stack of the crematorium located by the camp prison are accompanied by wide reeking clouds strung along the ground. They come from the burning ditches behind the crematorium, to which a special kommando brings gassed female internees, when diluted Zyklon B eventually chokes them.<sup>36</sup>

Let us return from this brief historical excursion to the observations made by Günther Niethammer and his novel *alter ego* Hans Grote together with his ever present Polish assistant, for whom that particular service was supposed to be (but, unfortunately, it was not) the only opportunity to leave the camp "cage". So what did the KL look like when perceived by a professional ornithologist (armed with his trusty binoculars)? Let me reiterate one of the previous conclusions, of the type which should be considered as at least not an obvious one: when one talks about KL Auschwitz I and its surroundings, based on the results of the research discussed in the ornithological study, without exaggeration one could state that it was actually an avian paradise, a space "where – despite everything! – birds do sing". To explain that seemingly mysterious situation, let me quote the researcher:

The lack of natural enemies could be the reason for the existence of a rich population of birds within the camp area. Neither dogs nor cats are allowed here. Guards kill any stray animals on site. Only birds of prey, mainly buzzards and magpies, cause some deterioration of the bird population.<sup>37</sup>

When one combines the above statements with the previously referenced *Special Order of the HQ*, it might be necessary to supplement the multi-faceted map of tensions and contrasts which constitute the story of "the life of birds in Auschwitz" with yet another element. The care with which the camp authorities approached the protected species of animals (birds) would easily fit the whole

<sup>35</sup> Contrary to general conviction, what Szmaglewska grasped intuitively, birds possess a keen sense of smell. Vide S. Steiger, A.E. Fidler, M. Valcu, B. Kempenaers, "Avian olfactory receptor gene repertoires: evidence for a well-developed sense of smell in birds?", *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* [online] 2008, vol. 275, issue 1649; <http://rspb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/275/1649/2309> [accessed on: 15.03.2017].

<sup>36</sup> A. Lundholm, *Wrota piekiel. Ravensbrück*, trans. E. Czerwiakowska, afterword J. Szymonczek, Warsaw 2014, p. 248. [English version translated from Polish] At this point, I would like to note that the referenced account is filled with various ornithological remarks, which certainly deserve a separate interpretation.

<sup>37</sup> A. Surmiński, *Życie ptaków w Auschwitz...*, p. 117. Being a quote from Niethammer's dissertation, the fragment was italicised in the novel.

concept of bio-power applied by the NSDAP regime, a concept within which a ban on cruelty towards fauna<sup>38</sup> would offer a striking contrast to the treatment of “racially inferior” human victims.

As it will become evident in a moment, however, nothing happens in nature in isolation; thus the edge of the Nazi extermination policy directed at human populations, mainly the Jewish nation, had a severe influence on the ecosystem as a whole, including its avian representatives. The area of Birkenau (the former village of Brzezinka) was the place where the disturbing process appeared in full force. However ambiguous it might sound, the news of the decision of the SS authorities to place a second part of the camp within the area of the village, intended to soon vanish from the face of the earth, from the perspective of a professional researcher must have seemed a unique opportunity, a real challenge. Therefore, the German protagonist of Surminski’s novel undertakes a plan “to study the current population [before the development of the Birkenau complex] of fowls in the village and the surrounding areas, later to observe the changes during the construction works, and finally to record its size after the works are finished”.<sup>39</sup> The conclusions of the thus designed comparative experiment should not be difficult to anticipate. They could be partly deduced from the yearning gazes of the male and female internees as depicted by Seweryna Szmaglewska. “No bird ever flies low over Birkenau...” And indeed, what the soldier/biologist managed to conclude based on his detailed study, was a steady gradual decline of the population of avi-fauna until its complete disappearance, with one significant exception.

Before I reveal which bird species took a liking to the place of the mass crime, the genocide committed by the Nazis, I should devote a few lines to the complex intertextual relationship between the contemporary novel analysed in this text and its (apparent?) academic counterpart, Niethammer’s ornithological dissertation. Obviously, not even for a moment can we forget that the domain of literariness is governed by its own rules, and even if it aspires for realism, as in the case in question, it would be difficult to expect it to offer strictly academic precision. It might have been one of the reasons why the German writer, aware of the risk he took, used the help of an academic consultant (a biologist) when working on his novel, which surely helped him avoid some gross errors (like an image of peewits perching on camp wires). Yet one can indicate instances where the paths of the writer and the scientist intentionally and irrevocably diverged. That would apply to the avian residents of Birkenau, the only winged creatures which, rather according to the writer than the ornithologist, were not deterred by the thick crematorium

<sup>38</sup> More on the subject: L. Ferry, *Nowy ład ekologiczny: drzewo, zwierzę i człowiek*, trans. H. Miś and A. Miś, Warsaw 1995 (here ch. “Ekologia nazistowska: ustawy z listopada 1933, lipca 1934 i czerwca 1935 roku”). Vide also: D. Heintz, *Tierschutz im Dritten Reich: im neuen Reich darf es keine Tierquälerei mehr geben*, Müllheim 2008.

<sup>39</sup> A. Surminski, *Życie ptaków w Auschwitz...*, pp. 80–81.

smoke. Those birds were crows,<sup>40</sup> a distinct *leitmotiv* of Surminski's narrative. The shadow cast by one of the corvids (though when considering its shape, it could just as well have been a rook) was imprinted on the cover of its Polish edition.<sup>41</sup>

In order to understand the special position of the representatives of the species within the novel's world, one must examine the contexts in which crows appear. Only then can one fully grasp their dual or even triple status. That would consist of a kind of multiplication of features, as a result of which the birds do not lose certain features of personalised beings (the writer's acute observations regarding the places where crows forage, or the ways they do it), and, simultaneously, it would function as a sign set deeply within culture, a symbol with a clearly pejorative taint.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, one could state that the German writer, who was apparently very inclined to ensure the presence of both registers, conducted a type of regressive inversion: contrary to many contemporary animalistic narratives, he constructed such an image within which that which is symbolic clearly shows from beneath that which is real; in other words, that live creature which consists of blood, bones, and feathers, in the discussed novel often becomes a mask intended to hide content which is hardly difficult to decode.

What would be at the end of the thread of the inter-novel avian symbolism then? Crows, or maybe their close relatives ravens even more so, have been assigned European culture a rather unfavourable role: they have been often associated with death, war, and epidemics,<sup>43</sup> clearly a result of their dietary habits. Throughout the ages crows and ravens must have been often seen in battlefields, cemeteries, and places where unburied corpses were deposited. Need I add that they appeared there to feed on the fallen or those dead due to a plague? The echoes of those inter-species relations unpleasant to man's heart, perfectly known by Polish readers based on, e.g. uprising-themed prose by Stefan Żeromski, also permeated the Lager novel of the contemporary German writer (though it need be stressed

<sup>40</sup> That could have also applied to other camps. Corvids, being the only birds appearing within the field of view (and hearing) of the female internees in Majdanek, were indicated by Danuta Brzozko-Mędryk in her recollections. "We are waiting for «ab» like for a regular «beat it», but all we can hear is the cawing of ravens – the only birds that seek carcass here". D. Brzozko-Mędryk, *Niebo bez ptaków...*, p. 119.

<sup>41</sup> Accidentally, that has been one of the most common concepts reproduced to the point of verging on plagiarism, which one could find in a surprisingly large group of camp-themed publications. The image of birds perched on camp barbed wire can, therefore, be found on the covers of the following books (the list is surely non-exhaustive) – L. Wyszczelski, *Jeńcy wojny polsko-rosyjskiej 1919–1920*, Warsaw 2014; V.E. Frankl, *Człowiek w poszukiwaniu sensu*, trans. A. Wolnicka, Warsaw 2015; S. Helm, *If this a woman? Inside Ravensbrück: Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women*, London 2015; Z. Posmysz, *Wakacje nad Adriatykiem*, Krakow 2017.

<sup>42</sup> NB, the multi-layer metaphor of crows in Surminski's novel was indicated by Mirosław Ossowski, the author of the book's *Afterword*. Vide A. Surminski, *Życie ptaków w Auschwitz...*, p. 186.

<sup>43</sup> Vide W. Kopaliński, *Słownik mitów i tradycji kultury*, Warsaw 1985, p. 549.

that he undertook at least one attempt to re-interpret the cultural image of the so negatively depicted birds).<sup>44</sup> When human ashes began to fill up the neighbouring ponds, when based on the orders of the camp HQ the centuries-long bond between the earth and the farmers cultivating it was broken, Hans Grote recorded in his notes: “There are no other birds than crows in Brzezinka”,<sup>45</sup> while the reason why they went in their masses between the barbed wire, rather obviously, did not differentiate them much from their mediaeval ancestors. In one instance, the analogy between contemporary times and the Middle Ages was simply striking:

On the morning, when Marek looked through the window, he saw the roll call square in front of him. It was usually empty, sometimes the gallows waited ready for work. It was mobile. When the square was required for official parades or concerts, the horrible killing tool was removed. The original practice of leaving the executed hanging on the gallows for hours, as Grote used to call it: to deter others, was lifted after crows flocked to a hanged man, and tore his flesh piece by piece. After that they ordered the removal of the dead to the crematorium even before they went cold.<sup>46</sup>

When staring at that scene, or, actually, overcoming the urge to divert one’s eyes, one could recall some of the most drastic scenes in the history of the cinema: a fragment of a film by Lech Majewski entitled *Młyn i krzyż* (*The Mill and the Cross*), in which the main role was also played by an executed convict, and scavenger birds which accompanied him until his bitter end (and even after it). Staying for a moment longer within the circle of associations with paintings (as Majewski’s film was based on a painting by Pieter Breugel the Elder), one could refer to yet another work, i.e. *The Apotheosis of War* by Vasily Vereshchagin. A pyramid of human skulls, ravens gathering around it, and in the background a blank horizon with the stubs of dried trees. The final part of the inscription on the frame “To all great conquerors, past, present, and future” enables one to span a historical bridge between the fighting in Turkestan, in which the artist participated in his youth, and that which was only to occur behind the wires of 20<sup>th</sup>-century, not exclusively German, concentration camps.

To slowly conclude the theme of the novel’s crows in Birkenau, birds which are automatically associated by Polish readers with Nazism (as the scornful name for the national emblem of the Nazi Reich, one could also add that Polish female internees in Ravensbrück referred to the German female guards who terrorised them as crows),<sup>47</sup> it need be added that within the camp they had their earth-bound

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<sup>44</sup> “«Dog does not eat dog», Marek thought. Is it possible that crows from around Poland gathered in the interfluvium to see what is going on in Brzezinka? One could also think that it’s a cortege, all mourners clad in black come to the funeral.” A. Surminski, *Życie ptaków w Auschwitz...*, p. 145.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>47</sup> The name resulted from the apparel of the SS women: over their uniforms, they wore black hooded capes tied under on their necks. Vide J. Fabierkiewicz-Szyrkowa, *Gdzie nie śpiewały ptaki...*, p. 78.

“doppelgängers”. When during his comparative study, Grote tried to verify whether birds became adjusted to the newly established “model camp”, which developed near the former village of Brzezinka, he came across the following *dictum*: “There are only crows here. [...] They rule in the air,<sup>48</sup> while the rats on the ground”.<sup>49</sup> That which could link both species, or, possibly, make them compete with each other, was their similar dietary habits, and the associated common place of foraging, i.e. incineration pits filled with piles of dead human bodies.

### Post fa(c)tum. The return of the birds

According to the oculo-centric poetics of my study one of the main aims of which was to offer an “archaeological” reconstruction of the manner in which female and male internees perceived birds, I would like to finally quote yet another scene. A Lager scene, in which fowls played an important role. Though the fragment, an excerpt from Zofia Posmysz’s prose, applies to a place which we had the opportunity to examine closely through the prism of Szmaglewska’s documentary narrative or the partly fictional novel by Surminski (I am referring to the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex), nothing will be the same this time. And that is due not only to the indisputable fact that the presented events occurred many years after WWII, and the camp’s liberation. The scene which I intend to quote constitutes, for certain reasons, a multiplied negative image of the majority of camp accounts. As I have mentioned before, their female and male narrators gazing longingly at the blurring bird contours, could had been quoting lines of one of East Slavic folk songs:

If I only had wings  
I would lift myself to the sky  
To the clouds  
Where there is no pain and no punishment.<sup>50</sup>

Even though the protagonist of *Wakacje nad Adriatykiem* had the streak of “pain and punishment” long behind her, it turned out that it was only apparent, and

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<sup>48</sup> Lager rats as a special topos of various memoir narratives deserve a separate study. Let me offer one example: “And then that. Pain in the toe, as if someone stuck a needle in it. A rat. Drawn by the stillness of the body, it came to forage. The scream stops at the throat. A jerk with the foot. No effect. The animal is too heavy. But it sensed the impulse, and slid onto the straw mattress. Now it watches. Whiskers stiff like filaments, and beady eyes. Intelligent, examining gaze. Pull the blanket onto the face. Manage at least that... Then I saw – it went away. It did not escape, as they do, in sudden leaps, but receded calmly, stopping from time to time, ready to return at any moment. When the forage finally becomes still”. Z. Posmysz, *Ten sam doktor M...*, p. 226.

<sup>49</sup> A. Surminski, *Życie ptaków w Auschwitz...*, p. 143. [English version translated from Polish]

<sup>50</sup> T. Snyder, *Skrwawione ziemie. Europa między Hitlerem a Stalinem*, trans. B. Pietrzyk, Warsaw 2015, pp. 203–204. [English version: Snyder, T. *Bloodlands*. New York 2010]

that a return to post-camp reality is something exceptionally difficult, if possible at all. A strange magnetism not only prevents her from moving away (mentally) from the camp, but actually forces her to do the opposite. As I will indicate in a moment, in her journey, the former internee is accompanied by someone. They came back, too.

So there it is in front of me, that gate, unique throughout the world, like all entry gates topped with an arch with that dubious praise of work, while in front of the gate, as if everything was like then, for the vision to be complete, there stood a person whose tall slightly hunched figure was remembered by everyone crossing the gate. He stood and examined the road. His clarifying features were not unknown to me, and yet they smelled strange, like something that stopped both words on the lips and footsteps. A navy blue beret resting on grey curls, though worn like a kippah, caused anxiety, and disturbed my trusting certainty which accompanied me until the train departed from the station. We stood facing each other silently, looking at one another as if waiting who will speak first, while above us the hot sun was shining, and in that silence, which you would experience in a cemetery in spring, birds sang frenziedly. I finally said: “The birds are singing”, and he responded: “Yes, they were not here then”, his features became milder when he added: “You’re from here, too, I can tell. You were in the storage”.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Z. Posmysz, *Wakacje nad Adriatykiem*, Warsaw 1970, p. 236. [English version translated from Polish]

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### “Birdless Sky”. On one of the topoi in Lager literature (and its fringes)

(Summary)

The aim of the article is to indicate a recurring motif in the writings devoted to Nazi concentration camps. In many of the accounts of male and female internees the camp was described as a place “where birds did not sing”. As a territory over which there spun an empty silent sky. “A Birdless Sky”. The author of the study, utilising various sources, attempted to study the phenomenon from different perspectives. The results of scientific ornithological studies conducted by Günther Niethammer, a scientist and an SS guard at KL Auschwitz proved a rather unexpected point of reference for the voices of the internees.

The presented article refers to the increasingly lively contemporary research into the topics of Lager and Holocaust literatures. Ecocriticism and environmentalism have been some of the more significant inspirations of the proposed discussion. By introducing a post-anthropocentric perspective, the author was able to expand the historical field to include non-human beings (animals, plants, landscapes).

**Key words:** Lager literature; Nazi concentration camps; topoi studies; birds; animal studies