

Teksty Drugie 2013, 2, s. 6-11
Special Issue – English Edition



New Challenges of Holocaust Research.

Anna Nasiłowska

Przeł. Marta Skotnicka

New Challenges of Holocaust Research

We should begin by stating what the presented collection of articles and essays published after the year 2000 in Teksty Drugie is not. It is neither a complete overview of the Polish Holocaust research nor the presentation of the main Holocaust debates in Poland – these are still taking place. In 2000, we did not voice our opinion in the famous dispute which resulted from Jan Tomasz Gross' book Neighbors treating of the slaughter in Jedwabne because it was carried on in the media of much wider range. We did not perform reviews of new historical and literary works on the subject and, although the time passes and the circle of witnesses decreases, there have been surprisingly many of them. The launch of the quarterly Zagłada Żydów gave space to numerous historical, factographic and theoretical publications. Giving our magazine – dedicated to literature, anthropological reflection, and philosophy of word – a professional character, maintaining the academic nature of the reflection and keeping away from the main tensions emerging in the collective discourse allows us to be low-key which is advisable when such a theme is touched upon but difficult to reach when there are emotions involved. Above all, our situation enables methodological reflection, which seems indispensable in view of ethical challenges posed by the Holocaust literature. We stand for the continuity of the reflection on the Holocaust; the continuity, however, also assumes changeability in time and necessity to constantly renew interpretations.

The reader of this volume will not receive either a complete picture or a portion of new historical findings. Reading the selected texts, one could learn from allusions placed on the margin of the core deliberation, what publications, writers, and artistic approaches in Polish literature are linked with the Holocaust and what is the rank of this subject among other themes prevailing in the 20th century. This is caused by the sense of continuity and the common feeling that the new, younger generation of writers who currently speak their mind, has access to a certain, already established, intellectual landscape but they still need to pose several preliminary, yet fundamental questions. The position of a witness or a participant of events secured some privileges which resulted from having a given point of view; at the moment, however, generation-wise, very few researchers and writers belong to the generation of people who went through the experience of war with full awareness. This is why there is an urgent need to establish rigours and conditions connected with the Holocaust discourse.

One might have an impression that there is certain reluctance to use elementary source texts. They first appeared in the Polish literature of the 1940's. They did not enter the international canon (like Anna Frank's Diary), but they are discussed in secondary schools and it is impossible to graduate without being acquainted with Tadeusz Borowski's short stories, early poems by Tadeusz Różewicz or Zofia Nałkowska's Medallions (among the texts included in this collection, Nałkowska's work is analyzed by Bożena Shallcross). The phenomena have already obtained their canonical readings and interpretations.

In the context of Tadeusz Różewicz's output, Polish critics often quote Theodor Adorno's expression: "to create poetry after Auschwitz" referred to by the Polish poet in one of his pieces as it seems to describe well the problems of his own aesthetics. There is not much to add here. Replacing this classic interpretation with anything else seems impossible. The objective of "creating poetry after Oświęcim" is paradoxical – the world has been emptied, beauty could be a lie and words may be a sign of haughtiness and indifference. The experience of mass death is indeed indescribable and literature in which this theme is taken up should stop at the threshold of inexpressibility and unveil its impotence. The poetics of Różewicz's works – operating with the simplest forms and being anti-aesthetic – fulfils this objective.

In his book Fight for Breath (in the chapter devoted to Adorno's paradox), Tadeusz Drewnowski, a critic belonging to the oldest generation of today, who has accompanied Różewicz and Borowski for years, wrote,

While the theory and terminology related with the paradox (not mentioning the underlying historical facts) were of foreign provenance, in practice, "poetry after Auschwitz" and the reflection over it was born in Poland – many years earlier and without any theoretical preparation. During the war (therefore also during Auschwitz) and shortly after the war – among numerous martyrological literary works – poetry was clearly standing out: first of all, it was written by young people such as Tadeusz Borowski, Jan Józef Szczepański, Tadeusz Różewicz czy Marek Edelman or Jan Strzelecki. Some elder writers followed a similar path: Adolf Rudnicki, the author of *The Epoch of the Ovens (Epoka pieców)*, Kornel Filipowicz, the author of *Unmoved Landscape (Krajobraz niewzruszony)* Leopold Buczkowski and his *Black Torrent (Czarny Potok)* and particularly Zofia Nałkowska and her *Medallions (Medaliony)*. Nonetheless, the main cognitive effort and the risk of moral heresy together with all the consequences fell to the

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young... These young people – apart from their dates of birth (around 1920) and participation in the resistance movement – had nothing in common. There did not belong to one group. On the contrary, they lived in various parts of the country, believed in varied ideals, belonged to different, often antagonistic organizations, they experienced the war differently (conspiracy, partisan fight, the ghetto, the uprising; among the above mentioned figures, only Borowski survived Auschwitz, he committed suicide six years after the war). Although they did not constitute a community, they independently came to astonishingly identical diagnoses and conclusions with regards to their historical and personal experiences.¹

I have quoted Drownowski's overview because in Polish literary criticism, this collection of works and their interpretations have the status of unquestionable, obvious and inarguable, although they could be new to a non-Polish reader. The overview should be complemented by one additional comment: an after-the-war brochure written by Marek Edelman, the only commanding officer of the Warsaw Uprising who had survived the war, was later substituted by the later book Shielding the Flame (Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem) by Hanna Krall – prepared on the basis of her conversations with Edelman and it is now on the list of school readings. Besides that, all of the above mentioned works were written, although not always published, in the 1940's. Further, the list was extended and among the most important literary pieces we need to mention works by two rescued authors: Bohdan Wojdowski and Henryk Grynberg.

Since the beginning, silence has been inscribed in the literary structure of the story about the Holocaust: silence of victims unable to speak of death. What they have in common is factual realism, radicalism of opinions, the conviction of the tragic condition of the humanity, the need to challenge optimism and artistic innovation characteristic to Nelly Sachs or Paul Celan. The works still emanate cruelty achieved by minimalistic literary means. They are continuously shocking: I cannot forget a student who started to cry when she was asked about Medallions during her exam. Re-reading the book as an adult was much more traumatic than reading it for the first time – more superficially – at school. Emotional shock evoked by the book was so strong that it was difficult for her to tackle it.

Those literary interpretations were so intense that it seemed that the Holocaust literature would stop expanding because it would be difficult to go much further. Shock is of the absolute nature; it cannot be graded and planned in time. The above assumption was proved wrong: the last 20 years brought numerous works as many witnesses needed more time to restrain the trauma to such extent that they would be able to go back to it via storytelling; the generation of children of the Holocaust survivors also started to write. One of the examples of such later output are Black Seasons (Czarne sezony) by Michał Głowiński, a researcher for the Teksty magazine.

There was a discussion held for some time whether continuation of the Holocaust subject in literature after all participants of those events pass away would be at all possible; for instance, Hanna Krall, a writer who noted down people's accounts, ascertained that the subject should end at a certain moment because the only morally-grounded position is testimony; references to one's memory and experiences. According to the above claim

¹ T. Drownowski, *Fight for Breath: Bio-poetics: On Tadeusz Różewicz's writings*, Cracow 2002, 63-64.

maintained by Dorota Kawczyńska, among younger scholars, fiction is impossible – lack of its validation equals the act of “making up,” the art of creating illusion and as such should be rejected in the context of the Holocaust theme.

This orthodox view was linked with realistic, almost report-like interpretations formulated in the 1940s. Tadeusz Borowski was arrested in Warsaw when he was searching for his fiancée Maria and taken to the concentration camp in 1943. Maria had Jewish origins but this fact remained unrevealed back then. After a while, Borowski managed to contact her via letters illegally smuggled to the women’s camp – the same letters which were later included in his short stories. After arriving in Birkenau he observed “the death industry,” the conveyor belt: train platform – baths – crematory. Due to his Polish nationality, he was treated as physically exploited slavish manpower; at the same time, Jews were transported to camps from all over Europe.

Borowski’s short stories present the reality of the camp as an organized system of the distorted community where ethics was degraded, whereas survival was only possible by “getting used” to the Holocaust, adjusting to inhuman rules. Borowski was a young, radical communist. Initially, his stories were received with disbelief and annotated with commentaries as they seemed too radical. According to the writer, the camp made all the values unsteady and nobody, who survived, should consider himself innocent; keeping to one’s values in hell is an illusion. Undoubtedly, Borowski described what he saw and experienced; he gave his own name to the character in his stories. There are many other accounts from concentration camps, being of much less literary rank, which emphasized different attitudes: solidarity of prisoners, appeals to Catholic faith and heroism, therefore Borowski was at first accused of cynicism or even threatened with the court.

The debate concerning Borowski as well as – in different proportions – Różewicz is somewhat an “obligatory programme” for every student or beginning professor of Polish studies. There is no parallel here to the situation in Hungary where the fact of awarding Imre Kertész, who survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald, the Nobel Prize in Literature evoked astonishment. It seems that the situation of Polish literature resembles the one of Hebrew literature as described by Avner Holzman, “the more time passes from the Holocaust, the more persistently we are followed by its effects which destroy our tranquility and influence our lives.”² Although the time passes, the rank of this part of Polish literature remains stable. Its interpretations don’t change much, it’s hard to add something after the works of Tadeusz Drzewnowski or Andrzej Werner³ – perhaps only an observation that cultivation of the memory in its radical form is like a renewing wound which cannot be healed; according to psychoanalytical terminology, it is endless mourning. It is also impossible to forget or to limit anthropological problems to the period of the World War II.

² A. Holzman, *Holocaust in Hebrew literature*, transl. Tomasz Łysak, „Teksty Drugie” 2004 no 5.

³ A. Werner, *The Usual Apocalypse. Tadeusz Borowski and his visions of the worlds of concentration camps* (*Zwyczajna apokalipsa. Tadeusz Borowski i jego wizja świata obozów*), 1971 (first edition), T. Drzewnowski, *Escape from the world of stone* (*Ucieczka z kamiennego świata*), 1972 (first edition, then subsequent editions)

However, if the interpretations are to be maintained and the reflection continued, and this is how it should be, this requires not only openness to new challenges and dialogue. In his introduction to one of the editions of *Teksty Drugie* treating of representations of the Holocaust trauma, Ryszard Nycz wrote, "In this type of a never-ending undertaking, cognitive objectives cannot be separated from their complementary ethical imperative: it is worth describing only the non-existent experience; what we should try to give presence to what does not come from the order of presence."⁴

In the last few years, the thesis that it's immoral to create fiction round the Holocaust theme has not been considered that obvious. What contributed to its being questioned was – to some extent – the interest of the international film industry in the subject of the Holocaust. Roberto Benigni's comedy *Life Is Beautiful*⁵ certainly could not have been made in Poland in fear of provoking a scandal already on the preparation stage. This also concerns *The Schindler's List* by Steven Spielberg, a Hollywood fairy-tale about good people and the possibility of salvation. In this context Roman Polański's *The Pianist* is in a better situation as the plot is based on the authentic memories of Władysław Szpilman and does not promise collective rescue.

When Andrzej Wajda produced *Korczak*, which – according to Polish views on the conflict between the Holocaust theme and the aesthetics of beauty and the dramatic, conventionalized plot – had a scenario strictly connected with the facts and was black-and-white in order to underline its ascetic and documentary-like character. Even though it was made with reverence, the film didn't have good reception. After the publication of Spiegelmann's *Maus*, a Polish comic book devoted to the Holocaust maybe wouldn't have incurred a scandal related with violation of the taboo and the hierarchy, according to which this subject is reserved for the area of high and serious arts, but it would have been treated as a "caprice" of the youth. Prolonged discussions were conducted due to the 1996 work by Zbigniew Libera, a visual artist who produced a Lego set by means of which one could build a model of a concentration camp.⁶ On the one hand, it is provocative because many bricks composing those special sets are typical elements to be found in standard Lego sets for children, therefore it seems to stand for a specific warning and reminder. On the other hand, it introduces destabilization because it puts the only potential, but possible to imagine, user/player in the position of a builder of Auschwitz (including the gate inscription: *Arbeit macht frei*). I perceive this famous work as a prolonged shock strategy – in the language of modern art – of arranging situations that evoke viewers' ethical and cognitive dissonance.

It is not completely clear how to write a novel about the Holocaust – Dorota Kawczyńska distances herself from such works as *Umschlagplatz* by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz and Marek Bieńczyk's *Tworki*; I think that the 2012 novel *Night of the Living Jews* by Igor

⁴ R. Nycz, "How to describe a non-existing experience" ("Jak opisać doświadczenie, którego nie ma"), „*Teksty Drugie*” 2004 no 5.

⁵ We published Slavoj Žižek's essay about this film, *Camp Comedy (Komedia obozowa)* (in Polish: „*Teksty Drugie*” 2004 no 5).

⁶ Katarzyna Bojarska wrote about it in our magazine, *Concentration Camp as a Toy, Zbigniew Libera, Corrective Devices*, „*Teksty Drugie*” 2004 no 5.

Ostachowicz seems even more disputable. This does not mean that there are no other books by younger authors in which they were able to avoid taboo subjects. Here, I would like to refer to works by Piotr Szewc, Piotr Paziński, or Magdalena Tulli. Literature is entangled with other paradoxes similar to the Holocaust research: on the one hand, the subject should be maintained – on the other hand, nobody is in the position that would allow him to make statements and judgements. Some of them manage to safely get out of this maze full of contradictions.

The years after the transformation in 1989, after the opening of the borders and the explosion of global techniques, opened Poland to the world. The Holocaust is an international theme, therefore the Holocaust research primarily refers to discussions held in America. It is quite typical nowadays, but in the case of the present essays, this gains an additional meaning. When one writes in Polish, he or she inherits experience and the position of the Holocaust witness – we are sure it is not ethically indifferent. The outside point of view is what Polish researchers dream about – especially the ones belonging to the younger generation who from the beginning struggle with questions and doubts about what new information could be added, whether objectivism is at all possible, and what to do if the aim is in fact empathy towards victims and not a reserved researchers' distance. It could be stated that the Holocaust research in the Polish humanities is a place where the reflection over the representation of the historical reality meets with the ethics, even if it is questioned more often than other subjects. Challenges related with the subject of the Holocaust are not new but they are taken up in the context of the new generation of people who do not remember the war.

Anna NASIŁOWSKA

Translation: Marta Skotnicka