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# Exiting the Grave

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## Exiting the Grave

I.

In the eleventh chapter of Saint John's Gospel, Jesus speaks to Martha of "resurrection" upon the news of Lazarus's death: "Your brother will rise again" (John 11:23).<sup>1</sup> Yet, in fact, he brings about a kind of "revival." Lazarus is revived or returned to earthly life, but in the long run his life is still heading towards death. By contrast, the perspective of resurrection is an eschatological one. Therefore, I wish clearly to distinguish resurrection from revival and to emphasize that my interest here will lie in the realm of phenomena that we might metaphorically define under the term "revival" – in the anthropological rather than theological sense.

The Gospel story about the revival of Lazarus emphasizes the authenticity of his death. Martha – a matter-of-fact and practical person – tries to warn Jesus, as he orders the tombstone to be removed: "But Lord...by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there for four days" (John 11:39). We must distinguish the authentic death of Lazarus from a mere death-like state, from a situation in which a person brushes with his destined death, but manages to avoid it through some stroke of fate. My interest will lie in precisely those situations in which a person comes face to face with death and in some metaphorical sense "survives" his or her own demise.

Jesus wept by the tomb of Lazarus. Exegetes have pointed out that the Greek expressions used here in the Gospel text imply a strong reaction of disapproval and even anger, a state of anxiety and internal distress. The Jesuit Menochiusz – in his extensive nineteenth-century commentaries to the Latin-Polish edition of the Bible – interprets Jesus' state as "outrage...against death and the devil, whose hatred brought death into the world."<sup>2</sup> Contemporary exegesis places more emphasis on the

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical passages are from the New International Version.

<sup>2</sup> *Biblia Święta Łacińsko-Polska*, Volume III (Wilno: 1896), 312.

lack of faith in those lamenting Lazarus' death. In their despair, the mourners are trapped within purely human impulses, as if they were ignoring the truth – already known to Judaism – of resurrection.<sup>3</sup> These interpretations also point to Jesus' own hidden distress at the grim toll of death. Hence the mystery of Jesus' tears by the tomb of Lazarus directs us towards the inscrutable threat of death, in the face of which even God himself is shaken. The situations that I shall examine in this article reveal precisely this irreconcilable threat.

In Saint John's canonical account, Lazarus exits the tomb wrapped in linen strips and with a cloth around his face. He says nothing. Jesus orders the assembled people to unwrap him and then let him leave. We find Lazarus's story in none of the apocryphal gospels, either. The revived man remains silent.

Narratives about revival as an anthropological metaphor are a fundamental object of reflection for me. The tales of people who have reached the land of the dead and returned alive fill mythology and literature. Orpheus makes the journey to Hades in search of Eurydice, who has died of a snake bite. Odysseus descends to Hades to ask Tiresias for an oracle concerning his return to Ithaca. Aeneas visits Hades with the Sibyl before going on to Elysium. Gilgamesh – shaken by the death of his friend Enkidu – journeys to the underworld and swims across the “waters of death” to discover the secret of immortality. The most famous wanderer through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven was Dante, led by Virgil and Beatrice, though the *Divine Comedy* grew out of numerous artistic images and stories about the other world which had shaped the collective imagination long before Dante.<sup>4</sup> Medieval legends take up the motif of revival – which is present in the New Testament apocrypha – as a way of proving a person's innocence. Such tales treat the return to life instrumentally. The person who rises from the dead sings the praises of the reviver and testifies to his or her righteousness.<sup>5</sup> The more contemporary argonauts of the other world are especially eloquent – that is, people who have survived their own clinical deaths, experiencing what Raymond Moody calls in his international bestseller *Life After Life* a “near-death experience.” Their accounts fill the pages of many books and internet sites.

Apocryphal literature may bring us some knowledge of Lazarus's words and deeds after his revival. We find here two diametrically opposed images of the revived Lazarus.

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<sup>3</sup> See the exegetical commentary in *Ewangelia według św. Jana. Wstęp – przekład z oryginału – komentarz*, ed. L. Stachowiak (Poznań: Pallottinum, 1975, pp. 276–278. The doctrine of resurrection – as the object of fierce disputes between the Pharisees, who accepted it, and the Saducees, who rejected it – appears as a dogma of faith. The Talmud declares in the tenth chapter of the Sanhedrin tractate that those who reject resurrection will have no part in the future life. See: “Resurrection: Judaism,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Volume 12, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 345–347.

<sup>4</sup> See: Guriewicz, Aron, “Boska Komedia przed Dantem,” *Problemy średniowiecznej kultury ludowej*, trans. Z. Dobrzyński (Warszawa: 1987), 170–232.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, in the legend of Saint Stanisław reviving a man named Piotr, who had lain in the grave for four years. See: Siemiński, Lucjan, *Podania i legendy polskie, ruskie i litewskie* (Poznań: 1845).

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One of them – from the pen of the Czech writer Karel Čapek – portrays what I would call the trauma of revival.<sup>6</sup> The second account – authored by Eugene O'Neill – presents what we might term the euphoria of revival.

The Lazarus of Čapek's *Apocryphal Tales* (1932) fears for his health and is terrified of death. He is no longer the same person. He is breaking down under the strain of the life returned to him. He feels the strangeness and horror of his own existence after death. He complains of the torments of illness:

“Well, you are healthy, Lazarus,” Martha retorted. “You *must* be healthy, since He healed you!” “Healthy!” Lazarus said bitterly. “I’m the one to know if I’m healthy or not. I’m only telling you that, ever since *that time* things haven’t been easy for me, even for a minute – Not that I’m not *extremely* grateful to Him for – getting me back on my feet; don’t think that, Martha. But once someone goes through what I did, that – that,” Lazarus shuddered and covered his face.<sup>7</sup>

At the news of Jesus’ arrest in Jerusalem, Martha decides to go there at once. Lazarus wants to accompany her, but he soon succumbs to his fears and stays behind in Bethany.

Tears trickled slowly from Lazarus’s eyes. “I’d like so much to go with you, Martha – if only I weren’t so afraid...of dying again!”<sup>8</sup>

The Lazarus of Eugene O’Neill’s play *Lazarus Laughed* (1928) does not remain silent after his revival like the Gospel Lazarus, but instead gives triumphant speeches, punctuating his words with euphoric laughter. In Bethany, he establishes a new religion, which reaches as far as Rome and wins masses of supporters there. He proclaims the ecstatic joy of life, in which there is no place for fear. He not only rejects the threat of death, but questions its very reality:

There is no death, really. There is only life. There is only God. There is only incredible joy... Death is not the way it appears from his side. Death is not an abyss into which we go into chaos. It is, rather, a portal through which we move into everlasting growth and everlasting life...The grave is as empty as a doorway is empty. It is a portal through which we move into a greater and finer life. Therefore there is nothing to fear...There is only life. There is no death.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.

First of all, we should present a typology of the situations in which a condemned person may survive. We can divide the survivors of executions into two basic categories.

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<sup>6</sup> I use the word “trauma” here more in its general sense (meaning a psychological disorder) than in the strictly technical sense delineated by the works of Sigmund Freud or Dominick LaCapra – though in my view the two definitions do not contradict each other.

<sup>7</sup> Čapek, Karel, *Apocryphal Tales*, trans. Norma Comrada (North Haven: Catbird Press, 1997), 73.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>9</sup> O’Neill, Eugene, *Plays*, Volume 1 (New York: Random House, 1951).

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The first includes those who initially survived but were not destined to live, since their executioners later finished them off. The second includes those who survived and had the chance to live on.

Those survivors who were later finished off have left behind no testimony. We know about their fates from the accounts of others. The shooters approached the death pits filled with corpses, or walked among the victims lying on the ground, finishing them off with pistol shots. There are many such testimonies. They largely concern the Holocaust or the extermination of the civilian population during the Warsaw Uprising. For a different perspective, we might refer to an account from the years of the communist terror in Poland. The author is Father Jan Skiba, a Wrocław prison chaplain in 1946-1947:

One of the most horrific sights was the triple shooting of an officer...After the first salvo, it turned out that only one rifle had fired. The bullet had missed the condemned man. The officer ordered the men to reload their guns. This time only two rifles fired. The bullets did not inflict any fatal wounds. By then the officer had had enough. He went up to the man, who was lying on the ground and soaked with blood. He drew his pistol and shot the man straight in the head.<sup>10</sup>

But the tales of those who emerged alive from the gas chambers are absolutely exceptional. They had no chance of survival. At Chełmno, the victims were killed by exhaust fumes in the backs of trucks. Szymon Srebrnik tells the story of a certain day when two people fell out of a truck still breathing. They were thrown into the oven alive.<sup>11</sup> Jankiel Wiernik escaped from Treblinka during the rebellion of 2 August 1943. He saw people being pulled out of the gas chambers half alive, only to be “finished off by a rifle butt, a bullet, or a powerful blow...The children were the most resistant. They were often alive as they were dragged out of the chambers.”<sup>12</sup> Szlama Dragon from the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* had to remove the gassed bodies: “Sometimes we found babies alive, wrapped in a pillow.... We took them to Oberscharführer Moll, reporting that a child was alive. Moll would take them to the edge of the pit, lay them on the ground, stamp on their necks and throw them into the fire.”<sup>13</sup> Doctor Miklosz Nyiszli from the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* recalls that they once found a sixteen-year-old girl alive as they removed the bodies from the gas chamber. Moll – who was in charge of the crematoria – ordered his subordinate to shoot her.<sup>14</sup> Eliezer Eisenschmidt –

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<sup>10</sup> Bambus, T, and S Bogaczewicz, “Człowiek z piętnem wyroku śmierci,” *Nowe Życie: Dolnośląskie Pismo Katolickie* (February 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Lanzmann, Claude, *Shoah*, trans. Marek Bieńczyk (Koszalin: Novex, 1993), 113. Three prisoners survived the extermination camp at Chełmno – Podchlebnik, Żurawski and Srebrnik. The latter was seriously wounded during the execution, but managed to escape the mass grave and hide.

<sup>12</sup> Wiernik, Jankiel, *Rok w Treblince* (Warszawa: Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa, 2003), 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> Greif, Gideon, *...plakaliśmy bez łez...Relacje byłych więźniów żydowskiego Sonderkommando w Auschwitz* (Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2001), 121.

<sup>14</sup> Levi, Primo, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1986), 55-57.

another member of the *Sonderkommando* – probably describes the same event in another account.<sup>15</sup>

The group of execution survivors is relatively large. Among them are those who received pardons at the last moment. Although the executions did not take place, they still stood face to face with death. These include literary characters (Kordian from Julius Słowacki's drama and Pablo Ibbieta from Jean-Paul Sartre's short story "The Wall") and real people – like Fyodor Dostoevsky, who was condemned to death at the trial of the Petrashevsky circle, then pardoned on 22 December 1849 at the last moment and sent into penal servitude in Siberia for four years. Here I shall examine those whose executions were carried out and who still survived.

In criminal records, we find an astounding number of cases in which people have survived execution at the gallows. Historians of the British judiciary inform us that more than a dozen such incidents were recorded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here I shall mention the three most famous cases. On Christmas Eve 1705, the execution of John Smith – a soldier, sailor and burglar condemned to death for robbery – took place at Tyburn (where the Marble Arch stands today in London). Smith hung from the rope for a good fifteen minutes, giving continual signs of life. The gathered crowd began to demand a reprieve. The hanged man was cut loose, carried into a neighboring home and revived. Immediately, people began to ask him questions about his experience. Smith gave extensive explanations, which today might appear strangely familiar to readers of Raymond Moody's *Life After Life*. The moral of this particular story is unedifying. The lucky survivor did not give up his criminal activities, though he would "escape the hangman's noose" on two more occasions. Margaret Dickson – an infanticide – was hung in Edinburgh in 1728. Her body was laid in a coffin and loaded onto a wagon, which set off over the bumpy road towards the town. When the cart driver returned to the wagon after a break at an inn, he found Mary alive, sitting up in the coffin. The court decided that the condemned woman could not be hung a second time and waived her sentence. Mary Dickson used her miraculously restored life to bring an enormous brood of children into the world. Sixteen-year-old William Duell was hung on 24 November 1740 at Tyburn for the rape and murder of Sarah Griffin. In accordance with the practice of the time, his body was assigned to anatomy students for practice. But the youthful murderer awoke on the dissecting table in the mortuary and was sent back to Newgate Prison. He too received a pardon.<sup>16</sup>

Michał Maksymilian Borwicz (Boruchowicz) was the author of various camp memoirs and studies on the Nazi language of hatred, the editor of an anthology of poems about Jews under the German occupation, and a pioneer of sociological and literary scholarship on Holocaust testimony. He survived his own execution at the Janowska camp in Lviv. He literally broke free from the noose.<sup>17</sup> Borwicz was part of a camp conspiracy in

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<sup>15</sup> Greif, 181.

<sup>16</sup> All of these examples come from *The History of Judicial Hanging in Britain*. <http://www.richard.clark32.btinternet.co.uk/hangingl.html>

<sup>17</sup> I thank Ryszard Lów for drawing my attention to Borwicz's case.

which he was teaching selected prisoners how to use guns. An SS officer surprised them during one of these lessons. Later Borwicz found himself standing under the gallows. His memory recorded the last seconds before the execution of the sentence:

I see the SS officer coming towards me. Around me a kind of vague commotion ensues...a chaotic jerking, my vision is filled not by the gallows but by the end of the rope trailing along the ground. I become aware of a loss of support. With it comes a strangling sensation – terrible, yet somehow grotesque, since it is so ridiculously expected. And the hazy consciousness that this is the end. Was I really conscious of all this in the moment of my resurrection? Or did I reconstruct it all later?...Even in such a reconstruction the whole scene is reduced to a few details. My sudden awakening on the ground. ...A sensation of profound haziness...My friends told me later that at the very moment in which I had hung suspended in the air, the rope broke. I fell to the ground.<sup>18</sup>

Once he had picked himself up off the ground and rejoined the rows of prisoners, the German supervising the execution declared: “An old German custom demands...that a condemned man who breaks free of the gallows must get a reprieve.”<sup>19</sup> As a man who had “broken free of the rope,” he was treated in a special manner. Even the SS officers showed him respect.

There is one more group of execution survivors – the people who survived mass shootings, then dug themselves out from under the corpses, crawled out of the death pits or mass graves, and escaped their executioners.

### 3 .

Mass executions were never one-hundred-percent effective. Somebody always survived. Thanks to those who managed to escape the grave and tell their stories, the world found out about these crimes. There are a great many such tales, and we could easily compile a sizeable anthology full of them. My main source here will be the Second World War records of Jews who survived the extermination operations, or of Poles who survived mass shootings during the pacification of the civilian population in the Warsaw Uprising.

On the basis of multiple testimonies, it is possible to construct a general model of the situation under discussion – its specific phases, the varieties of behavior and types of experiences associated with those who “exited the grave” (the “revived”) and those who encountered them.

Everything begins with the firing squad. The mass executions of Jews usually took the form of a schematized procedure that was almost monotonous in its banal cruelty. The victims dug their own graves or were forced into a pit prepared earlier. They were ordered to undress. Then they had to stand on the edge of the pit or on a plank laid across the trench. Sometimes they were forced to lie directly on the bodies of those already murdered. The culminating point of this phase came with the German gunshots and

<sup>18</sup> Borwicz, Michał, *Spod szubienicy w teren* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1980), 23-24.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

the fall of the Jews into the pit immediately after the shots or a split second earlier. It sometimes happened that a particular victim was not injured or even grazed by a bullet. Jonasz Stern tells the story of how he was taken with other prisoners from the Janowska camp to a forest outside Lviv: “And here they were supposed to shoot me. But I played a little trick on them and fell earlier.”<sup>20</sup> Sixteen-year-old Zvi Michałowski – the son of a *melamed* from Ejszyszki – “fell into the grave a split second before the bullet could hit him.”<sup>21</sup> A certain youth from Tluste “fell into the grave untouched by the bullet.”<sup>22</sup> The Poles murdered in the suburb of Wola during the Warsaw Uprising were lined up and shot against walls, in the courtyards of tenement houses and in cellars. Mrs. Wacława Gałka was on Wolska Street. The Germans shot at her twice and twice the bullets missed her.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes the person shot was only wounded. Maria Cyrańska – a survivor of an execution carried out in August 1944 near Sowiński Park in Wola – gave the following evidence to the Warsaw Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes: “I fell to the ground wounded. I had been shot in the left arm. Apart from that, some shrapnel had wounded me in the temple and cheek.”<sup>24</sup>

A constant feature of the mass murder of Jews was the nakedness of the victims. Men, women, and children entered the gas chambers naked. In forest ravines, gorges, fields, and cemeteries – wherever the death pits were dug – the victims had to undress before the execution. Little Mendel Rozenkranz described the liquidation of the Horodenka Ghetto in December 1941: “They stripped naked and were shot like that.”<sup>25</sup> Some women who survived the execution at Ponary in July 1941 said that “Jews in their dozens had to undress beside the pits where they were shot.”<sup>26</sup> In her evidence at Eichmann’s trial, Ryfka Joselewska reconstructed the final moments before the shooting, when everybody was already undressed. Only her father had remained in his clothing: “They began to beat him. We prayed, we begged him to get undressed, but he would not undress. He wanted to stay in his underwear. He did not want to stand there naked. So they tore the clothing of this old man and shot him.”<sup>27</sup>

What was the reason for this mercilessly enforced requirement of nakedness? What was the point of this ritual of killing naked victims? We might leave aside any practical considerations and the doubtful material value of the clothes themselves. A certain move-

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<sup>20</sup> Stern, Jonasz, “Interview with M.A. Potocka,” *Odra* 11 (1988), 37.

<sup>21</sup> Eliach, Yaffa, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 54.

<sup>22</sup> Milch, Baruch, *Testament* (Warszawa: Karta, 2001), 173.

<sup>23</sup> Drozdowski, Marek, Maria Maniakówna, and Tomasz Strzębosz, eds. *Ludność cywilna w powstaniu warszawskim: Tom I. Pamiętniki. Relacje. Zeznania* (Warszawa: PIW, 1974), 316-318.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 312-313.

<sup>25</sup> Hochberg-Mariańska, Maria, and Noe Gruss, *Dzieci żydowskie oskarżają* (Warszawa: Shalom, 1993), 104.

<sup>26</sup> Grynberg, Michał, and Maria Kotowska, *Życie i zagłada Żydów polskich 1939-1945. Relacje świadków* (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2003), 533.

<sup>27</sup> Gilbert, Martin, *The Jewish Tragedy* (New York: Collins, 1990), 421.



ment within historiosophical reflections on the Holocaust has interpreted the motif of nakedness within the genocidal technology of *die Endlösung* as a parody – expressed in the aesthetics of Nazi kitsch – of the Last Judgment, whose iconographical representations had shaped the European imagination for centuries.<sup>28</sup>

Those who manage to escape the graves after the shootings – and thus, in some sense, after death – are naked. The revived Lazarus has the linen strips and cloth removed from his body. The survivors of the executions return to life with the stigma of nakedness, which makes their escape more difficult and sows terror in those they meet. Estera Winderbaum survived the shootings during the liquidation of the camp at Poniatowa on 4 November 1943. She crawled out from under the corpses and wandered naked among the neighboring huts, begging the petrified peasants for clothing.<sup>29</sup> A butcher's daughter survived the executions at Horodenka in 1942: "When the Germans had finished their work and left the graves, she crawled naked out of the grave [and] found her way to the village of Siemakowce."<sup>30</sup> In a short story entitled "The Landscape That Survived Death" ("Krajobraz, który przeżył śmierć"), Kornel Filipowicz depicts nakedness as the survivor's burden after an execution. In a purely practical sense, nakedness can give a person away, since the body glows in the dark:

How could he cover his nakedness so that when he broke free from the background of human bodies and found himself on the rough, light-absorbing surface of the earth he would not suddenly become an isolated shape, visible from afar?...The night still veiled his nakedness well enough. With the coming day, he would face a cruel dilemma: how to cover himself once again in the skin that forms the most human of shells – clothing. A dressed person has no idea what a problem nakedness can be!<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Stanisław Lem writes: "Naked, as they came into the world, they passed into clay. Murder here represented at once a substitute for the dimensions of both justice and love. The executioner stood before the mass of naked people preparing for death. Half-father and half-lover, he was to give them a just death – like a father justly aiming his rod, like a lover gazing at their nudity and offering his caresses...How should people stand before the Last Judgment? Naked. It was exactly this kind of judgment, and the Valley of Josaphat extended everywhere. The stripped and murdered people were to play the role of the judged in this drama." In the genocidal liturgy of the Nazis, "Judeo-Christian symbolism shows through, transformed into murder. Since the Germans could not kill God, it is as if they had killed his 'chosen people' in his place" (Lem, Stanisław, *Prowokacja* [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984], 28, 30, 35). Paweł Śpiwak points to the project of self-salvation at the origins of the Third Reich. The medium and author of this salvation is to be the Führer, "who regards himself as the irrevocable earthly judge of the Last Judgment, adjudicating the immortality or annihilation of every human being." (Śpiwak, Paweł, "Szoah, drugi upadek," *Więź* 7/8 [1986], 9–10). See also, George Steiner's essay "A Season in Hell," *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

<sup>29</sup> *Likwidacja Poniatowej*, Account 2209/118-1, Yad Vashem Archive.

<sup>30</sup> Grynberg and Kotowska, 332.

<sup>31</sup> Filipowicz, Kornel, "Krajobraz, który przeżył śmierć," *Krajobraz niewzruszony* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1956), 95–96.

On a metaphorical level, nakedness represents the stigmatized “otherness” of the person who has escaped from the grave. It divides those who are trying to return to life and to people from life and from people.

When the shots had rung out and the victim lay among the corpses, the time came for an attempt to comprehend this state of suspension between life and death, which evaded consciousness while still being recorded by it. In many accounts, this moment of uncertainty is crucial. Am I still here or am I already gone? A little boy from Wyszaków voiced this question with childish simplicity and naivety:

I didn't know whether I was dead or alive...It was completely dark when I felt a kick in the side. I was terrified that the corpses were rising from the dead.<sup>32</sup>

Henryk Bryskier – who was shot on 24 April 1943 in the Warsaw Ghetto on the grounds of Brauer's workshop on Nalewki Street – entered into expansive reflections on this subject, which he describes as a form of “philosophizing”:

I could not imagine that I was alive, so I believed in life that I was dead. It seemed to me that life and death did not follow each other, but rather that they existed alongside each other at every moment. I fell into a dark abyss. Then my astral body soared through the expanse of space with the clouds sometimes below it and sometimes above it. I don't know whether I subconsciously opened my eyes a little or whether the rays of the sun burst through my eyelashes to the narrow slit of my lowered eyelids, but I know that a kind of vague consciousness began to work. Thanks to this consciousness, I understood that I was not floating on the clouds, but lying on the earth and peering up as if through a fog at the sky, where I could see white clouds blown by the light breath of the wind. I was afraid to open my eyes any wider, covered as they were with a layer of dust carried by the wind. If my state was nirvana, then it seemed a pity to return to reality. This philosophizing took place in a moment of physical paralysis, but also as my cerebral lobes were gradually returning to functionality.<sup>33</sup>

The experiences described here seem to belong to a common scenario repeated in hundreds of accounts from people who have returned to life after clinical death. Characteristically, however, Bryskier rationalizes the mystical aura of his near-death experience and even adds a certain dose of irony. Ryfka Joselewska from a village near Pińsk – who was shot in August 1942 – came back to life when the weight of the bodies in the pit began to suffocate her:

I thought that perhaps I was no longer alive, and that I was only feeling something after death. I thought that I was dead and that this was the feeling that comes after death. Then I felt that I was suffocating with the people pressing down on me. I tried to move, and then I felt that I was alive and that I could get up.<sup>34</sup>

Sooner or later the survivors become conscious of their paradoxical situation. What they have taken for symptoms of death turn out to be the proof of life. The main character

<sup>32</sup> Grynberg, Henryk, *Dzieci Syjonu* (Warszawa: Karta, 1994), 22.

<sup>33</sup> Bryskier, Henryk, *Nowiny Kurier* (Tel Aviv), 4 May 1990.

<sup>34</sup> Gilbert, 422.

of Kornel Filipowicz's story, lying in a deep pit among the dead, believes that "death is some dazzling liberation of consciousness from the burden of the body. But then he immediately understood that thinking precisely meant life."<sup>35</sup>

The return to full consciousness of life is connected with the imperative to save it. An obvious strategy in this kind of situation is to pretend to be a corpse. The perpetrators always finish off the wounded after an execution, so the only chance is to resemble a corpse. Even children are perfectly well aware of this fact. During the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, the Germans shot at ten-year-old Irka Rubinsztein and other Jewish fugitives hiding in a bunker at 38 Świętojerska Street. Irka and her friend Halinka survived. They crawled out from the pile of bodies: "Then I heard footsteps. Halinka and I lay back down again with the corpses, pretending to be corpses."<sup>36</sup> Among the bodies, a living person must look like a dead one in order to survive. Above all, one cannot move. As Maria Cyrańska lay in a group of executed people during the Warsaw Uprising, "a German soldier stood on [her] back," shooting at anybody who moved. She managed to restrain herself.<sup>37</sup>

Yet simply pretending to be a corpse might not suffice. Another form of camouflage was often necessary. Here the dead might come to one's aid. Their bodies could cover a person and hide him or her from the executioners' sight. The blood of the dead could also splatter the living, giving them a corpse-like appearance. During the liquidation of the Poniatowa camp, an SS officer led a woman and child to the ditch filled with bodies in which Estera Winderbaum already lay: "A shot rang out and her blood spurted onto my head, covering my neck and hair. From the back I probably looked like a corpse."<sup>38</sup> Situations in which this solidarity between the dead and the living involved the survivor's immediate family carried a particular resonance. Sometimes the corpses of mothers concealed their living children. Irka Rubinsztein gives the following account:

I lay there a little longer and pushed the corpse off me. Then I saw that the corpse which had covered me was...my mum. Her blood had trickled onto me. Mummy was already dead... Halinka was only wounded, but she lay there in a faint. I shoved aside the corpse that was covering her, and then I saw that it was Halinka's mother.<sup>39</sup>

The corpse of a son could also save a mother. Waclawa Gałka – who was shot during the Warsaw Uprising on Wolska Street – made the following testimony at the Warsaw Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes:

My son Leszek began to cry that his knees were numb and a policeman shot him. My little son was lying beside me on top of my cousin Damian Pasterski, who had been shot after the

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<sup>35</sup> Filipowicz, 95.

<sup>36</sup> Najberg, Leon, *Ostatni powstańcy getta* (Warszawa: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1993), 92.

<sup>37</sup> Drozdowski, Maniakówna and Strzębosz, 312-313.

<sup>38</sup> *Likwidacja Poniatowej*.

<sup>39</sup> Najberg, 92.

first salvo. When the policeman shot my little son, his blood trickled onto me, and probably that's why they thought I was dead.<sup>40</sup>

The next link in the chain of events was to dig one's way out from under the mound of corpses to the surface. Some accounts depict this as a long process – as hard and laborious work. Those who managed to make their way out had to watch every movement. The slightest mistake could destroy the camouflage and squander their chance of saving themselves. So they moved very slowly, waiting for any possible dangers to pass, always on the lookout for a favorable moment. Vilnius school teacher Tima Kac lay in the pits at Ponary after the execution of 10 September 1941:

Despite the late hour, somebody was still tramping around on the corpses, pouring out slaked lime, digging about in the grave. I lay there, holding my breath, listening for every murmur and rustle...Suddenly I heard a soft cry nearby. I realized that a child was crying. I began to crawl in the direction of the sound....A three-year-old little girl was crying – alive, not even wounded. I decided to save her and myself. Whenever I stopped crawling under the corpses to rest for a moment, I hugged the little girl.<sup>41</sup>

The survivors only exit the grave with difficulty and at the cost of great exertion. They must overcome not only the watchfulness of the executioners and their own weakness – after all, they are injured and in shock – but also the resistance of the grave itself and the bodies filling it. It seems that in order to emerge they must first fight a macabre battle with the corpses. The roles are unexpectedly reversed. The corpses may have saved them earlier by providing cover; now they get in the way, blocking their path, as if they did not want to let any living person escape from among them. Ryfka Joselewska gives a shattering account of this battle:

I felt that I was suffocating, choking, but I was trying to save myself, trying to find a little air to breathe. And then I realized that I was climbing over bodies towards the edge of the grave. I lifted myself up and the hands of the corpses began to cling onto me, clutching at my legs, pulling me back down. But with a final effort I managed to drag myself out of the grave, and when I had done so I could not recognize the place. A great many bodies were lying everywhere, a great many dead people. I tried to see where the field of bodies ended, but I could not.<sup>42</sup>

Anna Szaret – a character from Kazimierz Traciewicz's novel, *Yom Kippur (Jom Kipur)* – was shot with a group of prisoners at a work camp. She survived and managed to get out of the mass grave. But first she had to fight a real battle for her life:

How she hated the corpse lying on top of her, which seemed almost deliberately or intentionally to become heavier and heavier. Anna was sure that he was baring his teeth in a malicious grin, baring his teeth through lips parted in pain and smiling with half-open eyes. With the great effort of despair, she finally succeeded in freeing herself from under this hateful burden. She turned him over on his side and knelt on his chest. Then there was a leg – no, it wasn't his

<sup>40</sup> Drozdowski, *Maniakówna* and *Strzębosz*, 317.

<sup>41</sup> Grynberg and Kotowska, 543.

<sup>42</sup> Gilbert, 422.

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leg – then a hand, which seemed to be trying to keep her in the pit. They wanted her to stay with them. Never, never ever...with violent movements she began to drag herself out of the grave. Something cracked under her feet, something moved. Air, air at last – she sucked it in with open mouth...She pushed off with one leg – probably off the head of a corpse – and found herself on the surface at last.<sup>43</sup>

Those who had managed to escape from the death pits and now took their restored lives into a dark and hostile world could either speak or remain silent. It is characteristic that this dilemma does not appear in the Polish accounts I have examined. The problem of whether to speak or remain silent and the related question of the listeners' reactions do not form major themes within them. But the accounts of Jews who survived executions reveal two extreme models of behavior. Some people talk openly about what they have survived. In fact, they feel a compulsion to speak. This imperative springs both from a desire to throw off a burden of experience that surpasses all human measure and from a sense of mission commanding them to bear witness to the Holocaust and to convey a warning. This group represents the clear majority. The others retreat into themselves and remain silent. They become separate, isolated, divided from other people by an insurmountable barrier. They have no wish to cross this line. We find this response in two little girls who survived the extermination at Tluste: "They dug themselves out from under the corpses and returned to the town. But they seemed to have gone mad, and they did not want to speak."<sup>44</sup> We might describe this attitude of silence as the canonical model of behavior – if we recall Lazarus from Saint John's Gospel, who says nothing and walks away after exiting the grave. Perhaps we could define the opposite attitude – characterized by the survivors' narrative initiative – as the apocryphal model.

Every story needs listeners. Without them, it becomes futile. Baruch Milch learns of the massacre at Horodenka from "those who managed to escape from the grave after the executioners had departed...I spoke to one of them myself. He fled almost naked to our town. He told me terrible things."<sup>45</sup> Milch wants to listen, but for some survivors it is difficult to find listeners. People do not want to believe those who have left the grave. They turn away from them or regard them as lunatics. Six women who escaped from the Ponary death pits "told of what happened, but nobody wanted to believe their terrifying stories."<sup>46</sup> The survivors' despair comes partly from the impossibility of conveying their testimony. This is the despair of people who have been crushed by the burden of a terrible knowledge – paid for in suffering and wrested away from death – which now is of no use to anybody. It is the despair of envoys from beyond the grave, whose salutary mission is derided and rejected. Mosze Stróż from Elie Wiesel's *Night* is precisely this kind of tragic narrator. After being deported from Sighet and surviving execution, he returns to his little town:

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<sup>43</sup> Traciewicz, Kazimierz, *Jom Kipur* (Warszawa: Alfa, 1992), 140.

<sup>44</sup> Hochberg-Mariańska and Gruss, 16.

<sup>45</sup> Milch, 121.

<sup>46</sup> Grynberg and Kotowska, 533.

Day after day, night after night, he went from one Jewish house to the next telling his story and that of Malka, the young girl who lay dying for three days, and that of Tobie, the tailor who begged to die before his sons were killed...But people not only refused to believe his tales, they refused to listen. Some even insinuated that he only wanted their pity, that he was imagining things. Others flatly said that he had gone mad. As for Moishe, he wept and pleaded: "Jews, listen to me! That's all I ask of you. No money. No pity. Just listen to me!...I was saved miraculously. I succeeded in coming back. Where did I get my strength? I wanted to return to Sighet to describe to you my death so that you might ready yourselves while there is still time."<sup>47</sup>

People who have been shot, but survived, their wounds still oozing blood, then thrown into a pit full of corpses, yet somehow escaped, are wounded once again on their road beyond the grave. The people they meet do not want to listen or believe them. They do not want to understand or even to help them. They react with fear, aggression, or evasion. They refuse to have anything to do with them. Salomon Günsberg tells of the survivors from an extermination action in Stanisławów on 12 November 1941:

The wounded victims escaped from the mass graves at night, trying to save their own lives. Without any help, only a handful managed to save themselves. The population of the neighboring farmsteads refused to take in those who had already been "slain."<sup>48</sup>

Tima Kac hid for two days in the forest along with five other women who – like her – had escaped from the grave after the Ponary executions: "We came across a peasant, who took fright at the sight of us and ran away with a scream. Later, when we met him again, he told us that he had taken us for spirits, sinful ghosts come to haunt the land."<sup>49</sup> The superstitious fear of the "slain" formed a common reason for their rejection. The peasants to whom the survivors appealed for help often treated them like phantoms, apparitions, or evil spirits. They warded them off with the sign of the cross or a curse, like Zvi Michałowski from Ejszyszki: "Jew, go back to the grave where you belong!"<sup>50</sup> They threw stones at them, as they did at Ryfka Joselewska, frozen in her tracks for three days after emerging from the grave. They threw stones at her for so long that eventually they forced her to leave.<sup>51</sup>

However, there were also those who extended a helping hand in spite of their fear – some reluctantly, as if under compulsion. Estera Winderbaum tells of an elderly couple she came across as she sought help after the liquidation of the camp at Poniatowa:

The old people were terrified of us, crossing themselves at the sight of these three naked women. An old woman threw us some old, torn trousers and a torn dress. She began to drive us out, frightened that we would bring the Ukrainians down on her. I ran into the kitchen, hoping to warm up a bit, but the old woman wouldn't have it. We had to leave the house...We rushed into another hut, asking for warm water to wash ourselves a bit. We were completely soaked

<sup>47</sup> Wiesel, Elie, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 7.

<sup>48</sup> Grynberg and Kotowska, 349.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 543.

<sup>50</sup> Eliach, 54.

<sup>51</sup> Gilbert, 423–424.

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with blood. They gave us water, a blouse for me, since I was still naked, and a piece of bread each. Then we had to move off again.<sup>52</sup>

Others treated helping survivors as a simple, evangelical reflex to feed and clothe, as I. Kogan – who survived the Ponary executions – relates:

Covered in blood, I made it to the nearest village and entered the poorest cottage. A poor farmhand who worked for a rich Lithuanian lived there. I told him who I was and what had happened to me. He gave me hot water to wash off the blood and something to drink...The farmhand let me sleep on his bed and the next day he took me back to the ghetto.<sup>53</sup>

Bullet wounds could be washed and allowed to heal. Yet those who emerged from the grave carried with them an indelible stain – the “trauma of revival.” For the people around them, they were now different, irreversibly altered. After all, one could not cross the border between life and death with impunity. One had to pay for it with useless and bitter knowledge, with alienation and with the stigma of madness. The folk imagination classified them as phantoms or lunatics – as dangerous beings, since they had visited the border between worlds. In one of his short stories, Bogdan Wojdowski sketches the following scene:

Franek swears that he saw a phantom again at dawn today. A phantom, and nothing else.

“A phantom, my eye. A Jewish girl escaped from the pit. People saw her at Babice.”

“I’m telling you it was a phantom.”

“A Jewish girl!”

“A phantom!”

“She escaped from under their spades and fled naked over the fields.”<sup>54</sup>

The bloody and naked fugitives from the graves were treated like lunatics as they stole across the fields. Yet there was no way to determine where their madness began or ended. Artur Schneider tells of a survivor from the liquidation of the Dubno Ghetto in October 1942:

The woman had gone out of her senses. She walked across the field half-naked, shaking her fist at the brightly shining moon, as if blaming it for the crime that had been committed. She wandered around like this for two days. Eventually somebody from the village, probably the head man, notified the police.<sup>55</sup>

We find a brilliant study of the trauma of revival in Saul Bellow’s novel, *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, in which a certain eccentric New York intellectual, Artur Sammler, remembers being “marked for death” in German-occupied Poland. He passes through all the stages

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<sup>52</sup> *Likwidacja Poniatowej*.

<sup>53</sup> Grynberg and Kotowska, 544.

<sup>54</sup> Wojdowski, Bogusław, *Mały człowiek, nieme ptasze, klatka i świat: Opowiadania* (Warszawa: PIW, 1975), 68.

<sup>55</sup> Schneider, Artur, *Jak ścigane zwierzę* (Lublin: Norbertinum, 2003), 152-153.

described above in the experience of revival. Together with his wife and a few dozen other people, he stands naked on the edge of a grave they have dug themselves. After the shots, he tumbles down into the pit. The falling bodies crush him and his dead wife lying beside him. Somehow he escapes: "Struggling out much later from the weight of corpses, crawling out of the loose soil."<sup>56</sup> After digging himself out from under the bodies, he becomes a partisan in the woods near the town of Zamość. He carries a gun and begins to shoot people himself. Once he captures a German, disarms him, orders him to undress and shoots him at close range:

That man to Sammler was already underground. He was no longer dressed for life. He was marked, lost. Had to go. Was gone...Sammler pulled the trigger...A second shot went through the head and shattered it. Bone burst. Matter flew out...When he fired his gun, Sammler, himself nearly a corpse, burst into life.<sup>57</sup>

Later he must flee the bullets of Polish partisans, who have turned against the Jewish fighters. He finds shelter in a tomb. The pre-war caretaker of the cemetery hides him inside a family mausoleum and brings him food. Years later, Sammler reflects: "By opening the tomb to me, he let me live."<sup>58</sup>

For Artur Sammler, his existence in the tomb is both a wartime memory and a symbol of his fate. There are those whom humanity "marks for death," against whom it "shuts a door." Sammler belongs to this "written-off category." Admittedly, he is still alive in spite of everything, but a "certain hypersensitivity" – as he puts it – remains with him.<sup>59</sup> It is difficult for him to define his attitude towards himself. What is a person who "has come back from the grave and who "for quite a long time...had felt that he was not necessarily human"?<sup>60</sup> What is a person who has been "inside death"?<sup>61</sup> Is he filled with indifference towards the world or delight at the most trivial manifestations of existence? Does he become a pure spirit, completely separate and liberated from the chains of Nature, or rather somebody who is unusually sensitive to the material substance of reality and the biological conditions of human life? Sammler is unable to answer these questions. He is a riddle to himself. As a correspondent for the American press during the Suez Crisis in 1956, he wades through hundreds of corpses in the hot sands of the desert: "The clothes of the dead...were strained by the swelling, the gases, the fluids...In the sun the faces softened, blackened, melted, and flowed away. The flesh sank to the skull, the cartilage of the nose warping, the lips shrinking, eyes dissolving."<sup>62</sup> He looks at the disintegrating bodies of the Egyptian soldiers as if at his own macabre self-portrait.

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<sup>56</sup> Bellow, Saul, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 75.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-115.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.



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He is conscious of his otherness, conscious of his deformity: "I am of course deformed. And demented."<sup>63</sup> He constructs two metaphors through which he attempts to capture the phenomenon of his life after death. The first is – so to speak – a telecommunications metaphor. It places the emphasis on the contact that never took place – on the bullet missing his temple and death missing life. Once he had stood naked before an open grave:

But somehow he had failed, unlike the others, to be connected. Comparing the event, as mentally he sometimes did, to a telephone circuit: death had not picked up the receiver to answer his ring. Sometimes, when he walked on Broadway today, and heard a phone ringing in a shop when doors were open, he tried to find, to intuit, the syllable one would hear from death. "Hello? Ah, you at last." "Hello."<sup>64</sup>

The second metaphor is based on the trivial experience of a normal day:

And had the war lasted a few more months, he would have died like the rest. Not a Jew would have avoided death. As it was, he still had his consciousness, earthliness, human actuality – got up, breathed his earth gases in and out, drank his coffee, consumed his share of goods... In short, a living man. Or one who had been sent back again to the end of the line. Waiting for something.<sup>65</sup>

This man who has failed to be connected and who has been sent back to the end of the line meets a dead friend at the end of the novel. The meeting takes place in a hospital morgue, just before the autopsy. The scene takes the form of an epiphany. Until then, Sammler could never precisely describe his own status. In response to the obsessive questions – "They say that you were in the grave once....How was it?" – he always replied: "Let us change the subject."<sup>66</sup> Now he stands before the body of his friend. He pulls back the sheet covering the man's face, on which "bitterness and an expression of obedience were combined." He understands that his friend has kept "the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows." For the first time, Sammler discovers the truth he has carried throughout his whole life, wrested from the death pit: "For that is the truth of it – that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know."<sup>67</sup> Yet this knowledge does not belong to the realm of the *episteme*. It is inexpressible. It comes with the removal of the death cloth from the face of a revived man, who cannot...or will not say anything.

### 4.

Escaping the mass graves of the Second World War was not a victory, but a deferral of the sentence. It allowed the intended victim to feel the joyful pulsing of blood

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 226-227.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 155-156.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 260.

through the temples for years to come, but it left him or her with an indelible stain of dread and humiliation. It was not a liberation, but rather it imprisoned the person in a trap between the black pit of death and the blue expanse of life, between apathy and activity, between the courage aroused by this passing of the impassable border and the fear nourished by the same event. Between solemnity, madness and buffoonery. It was an escape to nowhere, which led the person along the back roads of existence into a realm of otherness, into a dimension where the order of things was reversed, into a crack of being, into a state of inner conflict.

The experience we read about in the accounts I have cited in this article is a traumatic one. Elias Canetti seems to think otherwise. Referring to the “stories of people who come back to life in the midst of a heap of the dead,” he claims that “such people tend to think of themselves as invulnerable.”<sup>68</sup> It is difficult to agree with this claim. For the survivors who have told us their stories, exiting the grave did not deliver any sense of triumph over death or ecstatic affirmation of life. On the contrary, some of them – like Tima Kac – envied the dead their liberation from horror. Others – like Ryfka Joselewska – prayed for death, begging God to open the grave once again so that it might swallow her up. Perhaps we can understand Canetti’s thinking in the context of the two different visions of Lazarus from apocryphal literature presented above. Eugene O’Neill depicts the euphoria of revival; Karel Čapek presents the trauma of revival. Canetti seems to follow in the footsteps of O’Neill. Yet I find myself more convinced by the Lazarus of Čapek’s apocryphal account – torn, uncertain, and very fearful of dying a second time.

*Translation: Stanley Bill*

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<sup>68</sup> Canetti, Elias, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Continuum, 1984), 247.