

Overcoming impossible

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Summary

The essay was dedicated to late Professor Maria Orwid. The author discussed Maria Orwid's statements on memory of the Holocaust experience and on giving testimony on this experience. The discussion is done in context of other Survivors' writings and those of the thinkers who studied the problems. The emphasis was put on inadequacy of scientific language to the description of trauma experience, and on the Holocaust consequences for Survivors and witnesses.

Holocaust / trauma

In 2006 Maria Orwid published the book she gave a title "Przeżyć. I co dalej..." (Surviving. And what now...) [1]. The book, which waited years to be written and printed. I am convinced it would stayed spoken, like Homer's Iliad and Odyssey if Katarzyna Zimmerer and Krzysztof Szwejca wouldn't have typed the meandered line of Maria's memories and thoughts.

Those who arrange everything in order and prefer well organised libraries - would put this book on the shelf they keep relations of the Shoah survivors. Those few who survived and shortly after the II World War, or years later had decided to give testimony overcoming enormous difficulties to put in words their own, personal experience of unimaginable events in inhumane time. Some of them were writing even immediately after, when there was nobody wanting to listen to their relation, nor to try to understand their experience. Maria's book is one of many which were written and printed late. One could even say

that it sinks in a flood of the Children of the Holocaust ...

Maria was telling us about her adolescent diaries she kept writing in the Przemyśl ghetto. She destroyed her memoirs trying to erase her first love when the boy appeared not to be worthy of her affects. If she hadn't – she used to say – she would overcome Anna Frank in popularity. This is not an exceptional story. Many adolescents write diaries; many destroy them being ashamed of their first dramatic loves, as if burning the diaries in a stove could erase the first love from personal memory.

But, when Jerzy Kosinski published the *Painted bird* she was his enthusiastic supporter. She was convinced, that the method Kosinski used, a child perspective and a children's language, has a power to bring the Shoah experience to people better than any other.

The opinion she presented also in her research rapports since the first publication on the Auschwitz survivors. She kept this position in her texts on the Shoah survivors based on studies carried on half a century later. And, repeated it once more in one of her last texts:

"The Kraków team was aware that the language and terminology developed within the fields of psychopathology and clinical psychia-

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try were inadequate to describe either the concentration camp experience or the post-war problems of former prisoners." [2]

But, for Maria Orwid, Auschwitz remained the synonym and symbol of the Shoah, in spite of the fact that her close relatives were killed in another place.

Was it the reason for her (and her colleagues also) not asking the former prisoners of Auschwitz-Birkenau about their ethnic identity? Or, maybe, quite opposite – she did not ask – even hadn't thought about such question, and made Auschwitz the symbol of inhumane treating human beings?

But, she wrote also:

"We believed at the time that it was honest to approach the impact of Nazi ideology on human beings from an existential, universal human position." [3, p. 96]

Can we accept this declaration as satisfactory? Many times she emphasised, that former prisoners of Auschwitz, mainly political prisoners, were significantly different from the Shoah survivors. The significant difference was – in her opinion – the feeling of guilt connected with the surviving, while the other had perished.

Entering the Jagiellonian University in 1949, she had applied for membership in a students' organisation (communist, of course; no other existed at the time; however, she always declared herself as left-oriented). She was never hiding she was a Jewess. The executive committee chairman asked her, in front of the group: *How did it happen that you live, colleague?* And this question touched again the hard feeling of inappropriateness of being among the living. Being psychiatrists and psychotherapists we find no difficulty in describing her problem at the moment. We know about the survivors' feeling of guilt. But we know also about difficulties in communication to other person the experience of the trauma of the Shoah. How difficult it is to feel to be understood, empathically understood.

Maria Orwid identified – at least for herself – one more factor responsible for the delay in approaching experience of the Shoah. It was – (what she called) "Jewish sadness". It was her

conclusion based on studies of former prisoners of Auschwitz.

In psychopathology sadness, is the basic symptom of depression. And, as a depressive symptom sadness was enlisted among symptoms of the KZ Syndrome, and later in the PTSD syndrome. However, the great career of the concept of PTSD, and especially its grouping with neurotic and somatoform disorders in ICD-10, as well as the specific interest of psychiatrists in the specificity of affective disorders, to some extent diminished the attention on sadness in survivors.

Nevertheless, I presume that what Maria Orwid was having on her mind talking about "Jewish sadness" was an overwhelming feeling of loss. She was thinking rather about the loss of relatives and friends, and the loss of tradition, the tradition of the European culture included. And, about the loss of sense, connected with the break of European culture. In this context her question gains many meanings. She answered this question with something more than her research on consequences of the Shoah trauma through generations. The studies she had been continuing even convinced, that methods of psychiatry, psychology, and theory of psychotherapy lack adequacy to get to their essence and to describe them.

Out-speaking her own story was also not enough. Her own way was the effort to transmit the importance of observing the value of human life and human dignity. The effort continued everyday, in each meeting with patients, with students, colleagues and friends. She was persistent and uncompromising in that matter; sometimes even difficult to be with.

Giving testimony is not an easy matter, and – I am afraid – psychiatrists with their scientific model of reality are less aware of this difficulty in comparison with artists.

The recently published book "Bohater. Spisek, śmierć. Wykłady Żydowskie" (*The Hero, Conspiracy, Death. The Jewish lectures*) by Maria Janion, Polish student of literature, confirms this, I think. Especially in the third part of the book "Ironia Całka Perechodnika" (*Irony of Calek Perechodnik*); but, it should be reminded, that Maria Orwid used to say, that artists wrote about the Shoah earlier and better than psychiatrists did.

For the problem we are discussing here, Janion's reflections on Imre Kertész texts are more important than that on Perechodnik's.

Kertész's writings were important for Maria Orwid too. She used to emphasise adequacy of the perspective he used, that of an adolescent, to describe the experience of Shoah (in *Fatelessness (Sorstalanság)*, as a child's perspective in Kosinski's *Painted bird*).

Maria Janion points out yet another aspect of Kertész's texts, that of giving testimony. Nobody is keen to listen to survivors (Janion follows Kertész's thoughts back to Tadeusz Borowski and Primo Levi); everybody tends to forget about the atrocities of the Shoah. That we already know, this is the conspiracy of silence. But only survivors feel the approaching catastrophe of covering the enormous pains of the Extermination with humanistic culture.

But, at the same time survivors are full of doubts concerning their truth as witnesses. The true witnesses are only those who perished. Janion quotes Primo Levi and finds the same ideas in Borowski's and Kertész's texts:

"Survivors are not the true witnesses, said Levi, but speak 'instead of them, in their name'. (...) Those who touched the bottom and stayed there, told nothing and nobody had listened to them." [4, p. 297-298]¹

Janion finds that the mystery becomes less obscure after Kertész's efforts to describe the inner experience of musleman. Muslemanism is the very end of the experience of contempt. And, the core of the victory over persecutors is in the successful defence of the personality and one's own integration over the importance of biological life.

We can find similar ideas in Kępiński writings; he perceived the way to survive in a concentration camp in the ability to defend inner values over the power of "the first rule of biology", the need to preserve individual life:

"...to survive one had to get out from the imperative: stay alive at every price. Those who subdued to it, were losing their humanity, and with this, often a chance for survival." [5, p. 16]

¹Trans. JB

Maria Orwid had overcome doubts concerning giving testimony. She had found inner power to oppose the processes observed by Borowski and Kertész as eliminating "the knowing about Auschwitz". However without throwing humanistic values away.

She writes in her last book:

"Holocaust was the event without precedent in history, the event which had changed the whole human thinking. It was the realization of an idea to exterminate the whole nation, or two nations: Jewish and Romanic. The nations which did not carry any war with anybody, attacked nobody, but had been indicated in some irrational ideology as responsible for all disasters of the world, at least dangerous for the Aryan race which was to rule the world." [6, p. 80-81]

"And what now?" is a question Maria Orwid turned to herself. But also to all of us.

And what now?

Half a century ago Maria Czapska wrote:

"The most horrible genocide in the history of human kind, The massacre of several millions of Jews in Poland, chosen by Hitler to be the place of executions; the blood and ashes of the victims stayed in Polish soil. They form the essential bonds between Poland and the Jewish nation. The bonds we can not free ourselves from. Poland is burdened if not with responsibility for the crime itself, for responsibility for its reparation". [quoted from 4, p.309-310]

We know well, having these meetings for a time, how heavy is the burden of responsibility and how difficult is giving satisfaction.

Maria Janion helps us again. She quotes Kertész:

"... heavy, black mourning of the Holocaust should stay an inseparable part of common awareness, and decision on such mourning will be The sign of a 'vivid value system'" [4, p. 310]

and

"The Holocaust is a value, for on the costs of immense sufferings brought us to immeasur-

able knowledge so has within immeasurable resources" [4, p. 310]

She concludes:

"We have to live in an overflow of pain, feeling irrevocable lost. The tradition of mourning lasting a year or two does not refer to this one. This mourning must never end. As ethical attitude is the cornerstone of the European consciousness. Poland, selected by Hitler to be the field of genocide, must not avoid this mourning". [4, p. 310]

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