

SUMMARY

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE HOLOCAUST FROM A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE IN POLISH DOCUMENTARY LITERATURE

This book focuses on the traumatic dimension of the Holocaust and how it is expressed (or left unexpressed) in children's diaries. Children have a specific perception of the Holocaust: it did not destroy their earlier worldview, becoming instead the field of first experiences. In my book, I try to gauge the line of expressibility - that important category of trauma - in a child's speech.

In Part 1, titled *Hic and nunc under the occupation*, I analyse personal documents written in Polish language by Jewish children during German occupation. These documents fall into two major groups: diaries and school elaborations. Part 2, *Literary returns to Holocaust childhood*, is dedicated to Polish retrospective literature, in which authors return to their childhood years, determined by the experience of the Holocaust.

In the case of testimonies written *hic et nunc*, the live experience is encoded not only in the literary meaning of the text but also in its material form. Form plays a crucial function in handwritten personal documents, whose authors often unconsciously leave additional interpretative hints, such as deletions, margin notes or drawings. Inspired by word anthropology, I include these elements in my analysis of the material aspect of texts. In my research, I aim at combining the tradition of biographical documents analysis, initiated by Florian Znaniecki, and the classic anthropological perspective of Bronisław Malinowski, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jack Goody and Walter J. Ong. According to these scholars, the condition of understanding a communication is to see it as a specific practice performed in a given context, realised through a given medium and conditioned by culturally shaped patterns of utterance.

In the first chapter of Part 1, titled 'Attempts at verbalising trauma. Notes of the Warsaw Ghetto children', I analyse the school elaborations of children from the semi-boarding school in the Warsaw Ghetto, located at 25, Nowolipki St. Thirty-four such texts, written in Polish, are held today in the Ringelblum Archive; twenty-five were certainly written on 2nd September 1941.

In Chapter 2, titled 'Diaries of Jewish children under German occupation', I analyse the diary of Renia Knoll of Cracow (born 1927), the notes of her contemporary Dawid Rubinowicz from the Krajno hamlet (district of Kielce, then in the General Government), the notebooks of Dawid Sierakowiak of Łódź (b. 1924), and the notes of two unidentified girls from the Łódź Ghetto. The majority of these documents were hitherto unpublished and are only known to a narrow circle of scholars. In the recapitulation of this part of the book, titled 'Against collapse and emptiness. The meaning of Jewish children's diaries during World War II', I also quote other children's testimonies, including three important diaries by Rutka

Laskier of Będzin (b. 1929), Miriam Chaszczewacka of Radomsko (b. 1924) and Jerzyk Urman (b. 1932), who wrote his notes in Drohobycz in fall 1943.

The mentioned diaries are characterised by their fragmentarity and subjectivism: at the centre of the text is the young diarist and his everyday life under the occupation. It is worth remembering that these diaries disclose not so much their authors' subjective emotions, but rather what they were able to write down. These authors lacked any considerable writing experience; we witness their development and struggle with the written word. Their way of verbal presentation of reality is less dependent on genre-determined literary models than in the case of experienced writers and readers. Moreover, writing regular diary entries was no easy task in occupational circumstances; among other difficulties, paper and writing instruments were scarce in ghettos.

The analysed body of texts is characterised by heightened expression, a condensation of events, and a tendency towards high context (in the understanding of Edward T. Hall), which is natural for intimate enunciations that show little consideration for the reader. These diaries are in a way hermetic; for example, they make little or no mention of the pre-war situation, and show little effort to communicate their authors' tragedy after the war. They are rather a kind of inner monologue, soliloquy, or more generally of autocommunication. Consequently, the author has no need to negotiate the meaning of terms or shared knowledge with the recipient.

Reading those diaries, on one hand we feel the unbearable tension in which their authors lived. On the other hand, we can presume that the very possibility of regular writing brought them some relief. The frequency of entries increases in particularly dangerous periods, such as the liquidation of the ghetto or life danger to nearest family members. This increase is not a conscious strategy but a spontaneous decision, as confirmed by the high context of the most dramatic fragments.

In the case of extensive diaries (in one or several books), the frequency of entries increases with time. This is understandable when thinking of a diary as an everyday practice. Writing entries becomes a stable point in the author's everyday routine, and changes into a habit or even compulsion. Writing a diary guarantees the stability of the world in a situation of general uncertainty on the most elemental level of existence. Constant changes of prices and food allowances, changes of the curfew, uncertain employment of the family breadwinners, the necessity of moving house, information about German repressions, ambiguous rumours and gossip: all these elements contribute to destabilise the world and make even the nearest future unpredictable. In this situation, writing a diary assumes the character of a repeatable ritual and becomes the only reference point in a constantly evolving reality. Lonely children try to cope with this *déstabilisation* through their diary practice. Often, the diary is the only recipient of a child's only confessor and interlocutor, children being often forced to constantly control their behaviour and keep their family's secret.

Coping with trauma by writing a diary, however, is not limited to expressing deep psychological wounds. Children sentenced to death are exposed to the terrifying

randomness of existence. Diary writing may constitute an antidote to such a state of consciousness, allowing the subject to confirm its existence, consolidate and emerge from an undistinguished human mass. Such motivation is observed in the diary written by an unidentified girl during the liquidation of the Łódź Ghetto. This diary contains little reflection or expression of the author's feelings; instead, it focuses on narrating from real events. Yet these descriptions are too scant to play the function of a real chronicle. It seems that the girl's primary motivation was to order the surrounding chaos and familiarise with it. Writing her diary helped her detach herself emotionally from the surrounding events.

The diary of Dawid Sierakowiak shows a very specific form of self-affirmation, where each entry is a description of the boy's struggle with death by starvation. The boy's existence is increasingly reduced to his corporality, which begins to dominate other aspects of his life: he distances himself from his friends, loses motivation to learn. The continuous self-analysis through writing emerges as the only form of opposition against a brute force that reduces his world to the bodily aspect, an attempt to break free from corporality.

In some diaries, such as the one by Renia Knoll, the notebook becomes the only available autonomous space, where the child may write or draw anything it wants. The notebook contains a world entirely dependent on the author. In the context of German occupation and the menace of extermination, such an oasis of unbound freedom was very attractive. The space of autonomy granted by a diary is also shown in the description of children's outbursts of rage against their parents. Regardless of the war context, the diaries' authors were teenagers and were reacting to their relationships with parents in a typically emotional way. In memoirs written at a later time, this thread seldom appears: it may have been considered too intimate or of little importance in the context of wartime misadventures; another factor might have been the feeling of guilt towards parents.

In the autobiographical documents I have analysed - that cannot be deemed fully representative - it is interesting to note the crisis apparently experienced by fathers. Children describe paternal behaviour that can easily be identified as symptomatic of depression. These symptoms were also manifested by mothers. But it was fathers who committed one of the major wartime crimes: food theft. Such theft could be as little e.g. eating a slice of bread, but a slice was often an entire's family daily food ration.

For the majority of children, war was lived as an experience of emancipation from adults, and taking up adults' functions. In wartime testimonies, this is most often related to undertaking work, gaining food, and caring for parents. This is why children often surprise with their knowledge of everyday reality: they know the prices of food, are familiar with food cards and German occupation authorities' orders. Children were not happy with this forced maturity, as shown by the frequent description of school as an object of nostalgia, not in the sense of intellectual development or contacts with their peers but as a symbol of lost innocence and a world in which children can remain children.

The second part of the present book is titled *Literary returns to Holocaust childhood*, and focuses on the analysis of autobiographical texts by adult writers. The main characters here are Janina Bauman (born 1926), Bogdan Wojdowski, Maria Orwid and Stella Madej-

Muller (all b. 1930), Nechama Tec (b. 1931), Jerzy Kosiński (b. 1933), Michał Głowiński (b. 1934), Wilhelm Dichter and Szewach Weiss (b. 1935), Hanna Krall (b. 1937), Roma Ligocka (b. 1938) and Piotr Matywiecki (b. 1943). Their relations, memoirs, literary descriptions of the past make up the core of the research material, completed by other, less seminal works.

The first chapter of this part, 'Recurrent motives', shows the emergence in literary memoirs of a vision of childhood in the shadow of the Holocaust, composed of recurrent themes, character types, event sequences and other elements that make up the communitarian nature of this experience and influence the shape of Holocaust memory. I have distinguished and analysed the following motives: 'Fear and death as main determinants of existence'; 'Interiorisation of occupational rules'; 'Emancipation as a result of enslavement'; 'The "dark" and "light" ones'; 'Foreign childhood'; 'On forbidden ground'; 'Kind of identity'; 'Thirst of community'; 'Neverending war'; 'The guilt of the survivors'; 'Continuous quest for community'; 'Emptiness and silence'.

The catalogue of recurrent motives brings us closer to the everyday dimension of the experience narrated in wartime diaries of Jewish children, giving a background for the subsequent discussion of their formal aspects.

The next chapter: 'Do children lie?', addresses the issue of truthfulness of children's diaries. It is sensible to ask what exactly could a child remember from the Holocaust, and how they later addressed the issue of memory laps, contradictions, adult knowledge, etc. There is also the issue of style and its relation to truthfulness. I address it through an analysis of distinctive narrative strategies. In Roma Ligocka's *Dziewczynka w czerwonym płaszczyku* [Girl in a Little Red Coat], I show that the form of short story chosen by the author, together with a lack of metatextual level and a strong autobiographical and referential pact (in the meaning of Philippe Lejeune), suggest to the reader that the author is lying or exaggerating her story. A totally opposite kind of narrative can be found in Michał Głowiński's *Czarne sezony* [Black Seasons]. Although it also includes the two above-mentioned pacts, Głowiński shows in every remembrance a strong emphasis on subjectivism, fragmentarity, uncertainty, giving an overall effect of almost unshaken credibility. In the analysis of Jerzy Kosiński's *The Painted Bird*, inspired by Maria Janion's essay *Sam w ciemni* [Alone in the Dark], I question the opposition of factuality and fictionality. In Kosiński's novel, I see foremost a symbolic description of an experience that, following the author's choice of narrative strategy, has been misread in a realistic convention. In reality, this novel is a symbolic expression of trauma and the author's extreme experience.

This part of the book closes with the chapter 'Child narratives: testimonies as events', in which I analyse formal solutions through which authors of autobiographies have reconstructed a child's perspective. The perception of reality is narrowed not only because of the child's limited knowledge but also because of its corporality, as exemplified by descriptions of the world 'from below' and 'from aside'. This sharpened perspectivalisation results in a random, fragmented narrative, coupled with a multithematicity, genre heterogeneity, and a dominance of event registration over interpretation. In literary reminiscences of Holocaust childhood, we also observe sharp contrasts: reality is described

as good or wrong, light or dark; from a child's perspective, there are few semitones and the grey scale is limited. Moreover, authors of memoirs who try to reflect the specific logic of children in their narrative consequently detach themselves from the mental universe of an adult, including the reader.

This fragmentary perspective results in unnamed emotions, unspoken experience, 'mistakenly' explained events overburdening the reader, who is forced to a constant and emotionally straining interpretation of the text. Such reception may be seen as a kind of 'historical experience'. The term was coined by Frank R. Ankersmit to denote a sudden appearance of the past, lived as a collapse of any time distance. The resulting conviction is that the experience of the past cannot be an illusion but is equally real and credible to what is given to us in direct sensual experience. This kind of contact with past events, Ankersmit sustains, is a useful tool for speaking about the Holocaust seen as a traumatic experience, which cannot be assimilated by the subject when it actually happens. This is because trauma operates a specific suspension of experience: the subject of traumatic experience 'freezes' the past in an unassimilated form. The performative nature of Holocaust testimonies is also a consequence of them being often the only medium preserving a foregone past world in existence. This concept evokes the reflection of Agnes Heller who advocates a new understanding of Holocaust memory. Remembering this event is pointless because no sense can be found within it. The issue, therefore, is to look at the past not from the perspective of spectators or interpreters; Heller sustains that with regard to the Holocaust, memory should be based on practice, on actual suffering, which is more severe precisely because it is pointless.

In literature that becomes a kind of performative actualisation of the past, the cognitive function of word is transcended, and becomes similar to its role in myth: word that reactualises cosmogony but, as pointed by Bronisław Malinowski, does not explain anything. The real function of mythical language is not to narrate the story of the beginning of the universe and the birth of man. The community for which this myth is constitutive knows its content very well and does not listen to it out of curiosity. On the example of mythical tales of death, we see that the need for myth is foremost a desire to confirm the world's order and the place of man in the universe.

Imre Kertész encourages us to see the Holocaust as a paradigmatic event, the 'zero point' of Western culture, equivalent to the beginning of the universe; in doing so, he refers to the function of myth in traditional communities. He calls those writers who try to tell the truth about extermination camps through language and notions gathered from this experience 'media of Auschwitz'. This concept is developed in the recapitulation of my book, titled 'The child as medium of the Holocaust', in which I indicate why child narrative are particularly interesting testimonies of this seminal event. The horror of the Holocaust experience is impossible to express. Paradoxically, though, it is a child's voice that can get us closer to the inexpressible. Children write about the various stages of the Holocaust, unfolding before their eyes, as of something on the one hand terrible, but on the other obvious and unavoidable, with no known alternative. Children have no interiorised premises

regarding the nature of man, rules governing human relationships and social life. They register the nightmare of Nazi occupation with the simplest categories, devoid of any ethical dimension: from their perspective, events are bad when they bring pain and good when they become the source of joy, safety and satiety. Most often, though, events are identified as strange, impossible to assess or qualify from a moral or cognitive point of view, but requiring to be immobilised in word.

Aristotle was the first to remark that injustice inflicted on a character that can be identified with by the reader has the strongest effect. In *Poetics*, he wrote that we feel pity for the misfortune of an innocent man, and horror for that of a man like us. Both these conditions are satisfied by children's narrative of the Holocaust, regardless of the distance between the time of events and that of writing. The nature of the Holocaust experience lies in the total helplessness of its victims, engulfed by an overwhelming machine that cannot be opposed by any act and escapes any cognitive categories existing 'before Auschwitz'. This is why a child is the best medium to understand the situation of Jews destined to extermination. We all have a deeply encoded helplessness that is typical for this stage of human life: powerlessness against an incomprehensible, often menacing world, and dependence on other people's behaviour that we find unpredictable. The memory of childhood and what has been repressed but remains deeply present, may become a bridge between the Holocaust and the world fifty years later. To penetrate in the reality of the Holocaust, we need to suspend the world as we know it, with its ethical, axiological and even ontological premises. It is of course impossible to fully undertake, but children's testimonies of the Holocaust open such a path to readers.

Adorno's famous phrase of the end of poetry 'after Auschwitz' has become a banality. We all know that we cannot express that experience neither through a *hic et nunc* description nor an *ex post* relation. It is a child's modest speech that falls closest to that 'zero point', but even that can only be a trace, in the meaning proposed by Barbara Skarga in her book *Ślad i obecność* [Trace and Presence]. Personal documents speaking about childhood at the times of the Holocaust are traces of a radical evil breaking into human life. As any attempt to represent trauma, these traces bounce against the object of description, yet they seem quite close to the unspeakable both through their simplicity and their referral to a universal experience: childhood.