

## SUMMARY

### *Text in the Face of the Holocaust*

The texts include diaries, memoirs, chronicles, accounts, reports, and letters. I have taken into account only texts that were written then and there. "There" means in the Warsaw ghetto or beyond its walls, in hiding on the Aryan side. "Then" means during the war and occupation. Fiction as well as post-war reminiscences and memoirs are excluded. The chronological limits may be explained primarily by the postulate of analysing the written records created concurrently with the Holocaust. The generic limits were dictated by an attempt to give a more detailed description of texts that may be regarded as personal documents. So far, such testimonies have not been afforded a comprehensive presentation from the point of view of literary studies, whereas the literature concerned with the Holocaust (created both there and then and *post factum*) has been the subject of numerous analyses and dissertations.

My primary source of material were the archive resources of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw as well as accessible texts published in Poland and abroad. The texts I was interested in are written in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish. Of necessity this analysis is limited to the texts written in Polish, with certain important exceptions of texts available in Polish or English translations. The source foundation of my study, although incomplete, is - I believe - sufficiently representative.

The work is divided into two parts.

The first part may be treated as an extended introduction and preparation for the analyses and investigations undertaken in the second part.

The first chapter deals with the generic specificity and the particular status of the analysed texts. Despite their variety, they may be read as a whole, a certain macro-statement, situated in a specific context of communication whose characteristic traits are: a state of danger, no awareness of the end, and confinement in time. Then I consider the possible form of description that may be adopted by a researcher of Holocaust testimonies. I reconstruct the ways of reading the testimonies that I find to be closest to my views (such as Roman Zimand's essay on Czerniakow's diary; Jerzy Jedlicki's article on the manuscripts of the members of the Birkenau Sonderkommando; Piotr Matywiecki's book *The Border Stone*, and the work of the American researcher, James E. Young) and make my own methodological declaration.

The work deals with the analysis of the discourse, not with the reconstruction of facts. Discourse is understood here as a way of telling a story. Thus I am primarily interested in how stories are told in the texts. Textual testimonies of the Holocaust are characterised by a defined diction. The type of diction and the organising principles of its structure are the primary subject of the research. The focal point of my interest is the *text*, not the *events* the

text presents. I interpret not the *events*, but their *presentation*, their textual reflection. This approach to the analysis of the poetics of written testimonies of the Holocaust does not violate their gravity. Rather, it makes it possible to examine the very process of the articulation of the experience. The analysis of discourse leads inescapably to anthropological considerations. We read a text to eventually reach the human being and to understand him.

The second chapter is a kind of sketch for a group portrait of the authors of personal documents written in the Warsaw ghetto; it is also a characterisation of the time and the place in which the texts were created, or rather a reconstruction of the way writers perceived the time and space.

The third chapter focuses on the material history of the texts themselves: the hiding, storing, and re-discovering of these relics of the Holocaust. The reflection on the fates of the texts confirms the universal qualities of the Jewish fate: respect for the Scripture, the Book; the duty to protect and rescue the record which carries the words of truth and thus becomes dearer than life.

The fourth chapter is the analysis of the motives for writing. These may be divided into four groups: (1) the first one brings to mind inspired writing, where the author acts according to a powerful inner imperative, a compulsion to write which is the fulfilment of a mission assigned by Providence; (2) the second is the awareness of a duty to testify about a crime, to alarm and shake the conscience of the world in a hope to bring about the world's moral transformation; (3) the third group of motives is either an obligation to collect material documenting the crime and accuse the criminals before a future tribunal, or a duty to hand a testament of revenge down to posterity - this exposes the gap between the longing for justice and the desire for vengeance; (4) finally, the fourth group is a universal desire to arrest time and to leave a permanent trace of the author and of the exterminated nation. The last motivation becomes a covenant of remembering, and writing itself becomes a *sui generis* liturgy of remembrance.

The motivations for writing declared by the writers themselves are rooted both in the Jewish tradition and in the classical formula of humanism developed in the circle of the Mediterranean culture. The writers also derive a deep justification from the founding values of the act of communication itself - interaction with another human being through the medium of language and through the text.

The discussion in this chapter leads to questions that are fundamental for the entire work, questions concerning the means and limits of expression of the experience of the Holocaust; the form of the account of this experience; and the possibilities of reading and understanding it.

The second part is comprised of three chapters.

The first chapter presents two types of story-telling the personal and the impersonal - that may be found in the analysed testimonies, as well as the consequences of the chosen type of discourse for the I speaker and his attitude towards the world described. I observe the play between the private and the public narrative perspectives, the intermingling of the

two realms and the transformation of the earlier established forms of private and public discourse (speaking in the name of an individual and in the name of a group).

In the second chapter I reflect on the place of description and its various forms in the narrative structure. There are two recurrent complementary questions: one refers to the means of expression available to the writers; the other, to interpretative stances available to the researcher with respect to the texts. The horizon of possible answers is delimited by the "look out of the window" formula. The formula not only defines the narration itself, but also characterises the writer's epistemological attitude towards the world he presents: on the one hand an emphasis on the directness of personal testimony; on the other, the concreteness of the image formed by direct observation. A look out of the window may also be accepted as a metaphor of the adopted interpretative stance. It directs the interpreter towards the objectivity of the world described, tells him to pay attention to the stratum of appearances evoked by the text, puts emphasis on the real and concrete. In accordance with this method of interpretation, I first discuss the motif of the window and then selected descriptions forming three thematic groups: images of persons, scenes of death, corpses.

The third chapter discusses religious discourse, and especially the tension between the manner of speaking that aims at grasping the presence of sacrum (and thus is exposed to the pressures of tradition, convention, ritualisation) on the one hand and the challenge that the ghetto reality becomes for the writer on the other. An analysis of the accounts of the forms of piety in occupied Warsaw and in other Jewish communities serves as an introduction to this discussion. I move from the testimonies of religious cult in those days, through the reflection upon the prayer itself, to the characterisation of three types of discourse: the lamentations of Karol Rotgeber, the martyrology of Rabbi Szymon Huberband, and the sermons of Rabbi Klonimus Klemisz Szapiro.

The terror evoked by the experience of mass death, a universal catastrophe, collective misery, suffering beyond human endurance and understanding - these set impassable limits to human expression. But this very experience forcefully demands expression. Suffering and calamity, pain and agony have always resulted in a heed to express them, reinforce them, and hand them down to posterity. The primordial source of such testimonies is the Bible. Other links in the chain are formed by martyrological treatises, chronicles of plagues, sieges, and pogroms. This tradition also accommodates the personal documents of the time of the Holocaust.

The experience of the Holocaust was strictly connected with the experience of loneliness, abandonment, alienation, being doomed to non-existence, to perishing without a trace. Therefore struggle to preserve memory was more important than efforts to preserve life. The witnesses of the Holocaust accepted the challenge that generations of their forefathers had had to face before them. In this way they entered the realm of great tradition, archetypal language, universal figures of discourse expressing the catastrophe of the community and the suffering of the individual. Their biographies fell into a certain pattern of existence, their individual lives exposed one of the most poignant moments of

human fate. The personal documents of that time verify not only the *need* to write down, but also the *ability* to write down such an experience as the Holocaust.

The act of writing itself becomes a heroic challenge flung down to the Holocaust. And although the surviving texts often refer to the old idea of inexpressibility, they manifest the opposite through their very existence. The confessions that "no words can express it", repeated in different ways and tones, are the sign of a persistent struggle with the resistant matter of language, not a testimony of forsaking words. If, according to the writers, the words they put down on scraps of paper had really not been able to express or preserve any meaning, they would not have protected them, treasured them, given their lives for them.

The ghetto can be described in a universal symbolic code, it can be forced into cultural matrices - the language of the macabre, the language of the plague, the language of hell. It can also be accommodated by the universal language of religious discourse - the rhetoric of martyrdom and the liturgy of destruction, which are the forms of apotheosising memory and which expose the disparity between the eternity and the present, the order of faith and the order of despair, history and transcendence.