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'DON'T LOOK BACK, YOU THIEF!'. VIOLENCE TOWARDS CONVICTED CRIMINALS IN PRISONS IN THE LAST DECADE OF COMMUNIST POLAND

Abstract

This article seeks to reconstruct the victimisation of so-called 'criminal' prisoners at penitentiary facilities during the last decade of what was the People's Republic of Poland (i.e. communist Poland). The introductory section outlines the context of the implemented and evolving penitentiary policy of the past years and the importance of the political system transformation for the organisation of the penitentiary system. The proposed analysis focuses on the violence experience in the relations of the convicted with the prison officers. The article describes the methods of building and reinforcing (inter)dependence relations founded upon various forms of violence – primarily, direct physical actions and the managing by the officers of poor social conditions that led to degrade and symbolically depersonalise the prisoners. The description, moreover, includes the strategies the inmates resorted to in dealing with the oppression they experienced. The analysis is based on interviews with multiple recidivists and autobiographical letters of prisoners who served time in the 1980s decade.

Keywords: prison, confinement, penitentiary, late communist Poland (People's Republic of Poland), violence, biographical research, autobiography, Prison Service in (late) communist Poland

I INTRODUCTION

'Don't look back, you thief!': the title phrase is taken from the empirical material upon which this study has been compiled. On reconstructing, as part of a narrative autobiographical interview, his first moments

in a penitentiary where he was put in the eighties for a theft, the interviewee quoted the disciplining command from an officer to the newcomer, whereby the former was instructed to completely submit himself to the conditions of rigour and strictness superimposed by a total institution. The words used by the guard expressed his reaction to a moment of hesitation, and served as a means of verbally disciplining the confused prisoner while moving along a long corridor toward what was to become his cell.

The phrase also bears a symbolic meaning. There are no scholarly studies that would directly address the wrongs and injustices done to the convicted 'criminals' who were confined in penitentiaries before the political transition in Poland. The command 'Don't look back, you thief!' reflects the strong conviction of the recidivists whose cases we have studied that their own experiences were treated as unimportant, unwanted, and incredible.¹ Those who decided to share their reminiscences with us shared their doubts: 'Is it worth looking back at things past?'; or 'Will anybody believe me?'; or 'Will the Prison Service allow you to get it published?'

The accounts offered from the standpoint of criminals, particularly recidivists, form a voice that ranks low in the hierarchy of reliability – as opposed to the voice of political prisoners or internees. The experiences of criminal prisoners in communist Poland have so far been peripheral to scholarly analyses. Paradoxically, the knowledge we gain in this respect has primarily been preserved and upheld in accounts of political prisoners. It was them who were the first to eyewitness the violence and abuses of the penitentiary apparatus of what was termed the 'epoch of socialism' – and, it was them who brought cruelty and inhuman treatment to daylight. In contrast to common prisoners, the voice they use is deemed 'credible and audible'. Being witnesses who have been affected by the state violence, they have frequently acted as persons of authority (be it in the public discourse space), displaying high civic awareness, knowledge of history and its laws. Their unshameful past forms the basis of communicative or mediated memory in which the personal prison histories of political activists intertwine with those

¹ Cf. Renata Szczepanik, *Stawanie się recydywistą. Kariery instytucjonalne osób powracających do przestępczości* (Łódź, 2016); Tomasz Kozłowski, *Bunt w bydgoskim areszcie śledczym w 1981 roku. Przejawy choroby więziennictwa w schyłkowym okresie PRL* (Warszawa, 2010).

of their criminal peers as a contextual background for stories told by the former.² This study seeks to bring the background to the fore in an attempt to reconstruct the victimisation of criminal prisoners who were inmates of the penitentiary facilities in the last decade of what was the People's Republic of Poland. This study is based on accounts of recidivists who in the 1980s served their imprisonment sentences for felonies or common offences. Confinement in remand centres is part of their personal experience.

After the year 1989, Polish penitentiary system was subjected to thorough change, in its internal (in terms of how the penalty of detention is organised) as well as external aspects. The Prison Service (Służba Więzienna) has made enormous effort to change its image and perception, by ensuring the conditions for transparent operation and opening the field for social sciences research; on the other hand, journalism dealing with penitentiary issues has developed.³ Meticulously elaborated and transparent procedures seeking to monitor the observance of human rights in penitentiary institutions and put in practice the relevant international ideas and recommendations have evolved.⁴ In spite of today's penitentiary authorities' definite withdrawal from the blameworthy practices prevalent in penitentiary establishments of the past, violence in relations between the officers and the convicts is continuously regarded a controversial topic.

A number of reasons can be identified for why violence toward common prisoners in communist Poland has been poorly researched by scholars. When approaching the last decade of Poland under communist rule, one comes across a double (reinforced) tabooisation; it was only with the transition that evident changes in the penitentiary policy became observable. In the post-war period, until the early eighties, knowledge on Polish penal institutions was mainly available to members of the power apparatus and to officers forming part of that specific social and professional environment. Characteristic of this peculiar reality, ideologically entangled as it was, were severe punishments imposed and grave repressiveness, solidified and

² Cf. Andrzej Szański [i.e. Zbigniew Gluza] (ed.), *Polityczni* (Warszawa, 1986).

³ Renata Szczepanik, Gavin Simpson, and Sabina Siebert, 'Prison officers in Poland: A profession in historical perspective', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, xlvii, 1 (2014), 49–58.

⁴ Cf. Ewa Dawidziuk, *Traktowanie osób pozbawionych wolności we współczesnej Polsce na tle standardów międzynarodowych* (Warszawa, 2013).

supported by the militarised Prison Service officers.⁵ The short-staffed system (penitentiary institutions suffered from shortage of those willing to join the ranks of officers) did not foster documentation and dissemination of knowledge on abuses of the prison staff. The shortage being a serious problem, negative staffing policy (recruitment) was the prevalent trend; its side effect was the acquiescence of the authorities for abuse of alcohol among the officers and use of violence against the inmates.⁶

Injustices and wrongs done to convicts under confinement in isolation in the past era tends to rarely, if ever at all, appear in academic studies. One of the reasons is the difficulties encountered by those researching into the prison environment. True, penitentiary institutions is no more an inaccessible field of study, but the ambience of distrust from officers and convicts was predominant for years in these establishments. The other reason is identifiable as the long-prevalent tabooisation of prison life; this is concurrent with the research topics that the Prison Service find as affecting their image and with the endeavours of today's authorities for building and solidifying a positive image of penitentiary institutions.⁷ Moreover, the position of the victimised prisoners seems to be not indifferent in this respect. Perpetrators of criminal offences, particularly the 'regulars' of penitentiary institutions, are inherently unwelcome in the society, and as such are not trusted. Their complaints are usually discredited or outright approached as a manifestation of manipulation. In the stereotypic view, recidivists are those who cheat and manipulate, promising they will get corrected but always breaking their promise. Thus, prison is primarily treated in terms of its retaliation function on the part of the society. This implies the specific phenomenon of social exclusion as the suffering brought about by the imprisonment cannot be socially legitimised and

⁵ Cf. Paweł Moczydłowski, 'Więziennictwo – od systemu totalitarnego do demokratycznego', *Przegląd Więziennictwa Polskiego*, 8 (1994); Renata Szczepanik and Krzysztof Soboński, 'Status społeczno-zawodowy funkcjonariusza Służby Więziennej w Polsce', in Renata Szczepanik and Joanna Wawrzyniak (eds.), *Opieka i wychowanie w instytucjach wsparcia społecznego. Diagnoza i kierunki przeobrażeń* (Łódź, 2010).

⁶ Szczepanik and Soboński, 'Status społeczno-zawodowy funkcjonariusza Służby Więziennej w Polsce'.

⁷ Cf. Andrzej Piotrowski, 'Wizerunek medialny Służby Więziennej', *Przegląd Więziennictwa Polskiego*, 67/68 (2010).

the convicts can never count on understanding their problems or on receiving support from the others. The prevalent conviction has been that they have what they deserved.⁸

II METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

From the perspective of the time in which our research was done, the recollections gathered as part of the project relate to the events that took place some twenty-five to thirty years earlier. The quality of the autobiographic material can be viewed differently, depending on the purpose of research. In sociology or interpretive pedagogy, studying a biography for discovering of facts is not the core object of investigation, as opposed to the way in which experiences are presented through the prism of biographical effort made by the informers over their lifetime.⁹ Information contained in accounts of direct participants or observers of occurrences taking place in a rather distant time scale are challenged by some researchers who place a bet, in turn, on reconstructing the facts. The issue that is most often referred to in such discussions is the passage of time and the consequent distortions (the problem of memory abuse/manipulation and the disputed role of narrative identity). This is connected, on the one hand, with the natural tendency of forgetting names, dates, or the course of events – and, on the other, with several reconstructive perspectives overlapping: one's own experience gets entangled in the messages established through widely available studies or mass media.¹⁰

However, the adherents of accounts produced by witnesses of historical events do not call into question the weak points about the word of mouth. What is more, they perceive the awareness of the passage of time or type of experience – especially if dramatic or traumatic – as a specific asset affecting the former prisoner's way of communicating things.¹¹ They point to the fact that the peculiar value of oral accounts comes into the researcher's sight whenever they can

⁸ Cf. Szczepanik, *Stawanie się*; Kozłowski, *Bunt w bydgoskim*.

⁹ See Kaja Kaźmierska (ed.), *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii: antologia tekstów* (Kraków, 2016).

¹⁰ Cf. Tomasz Maruszewski, *Pamięć autobiograficzna* (Gdańsk, 2005).

¹¹ See Paul Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 2017).

be confronted, in some way, with the existing archival documentation and are useful as a complementary element.¹² Such scholars also seek to state whether the information comprised in documents generated years ago is intrinsically reliable in its entirety, since many pieces of such information were based on oral declarations and the compilation of such information was inspired by the (pre)determined purposes behind what was meant/expected to be communicated. Is the archival material – created by humans, after all – completely free of any intent to mislead somebody, omit or distort some information of essential significance?¹³

These questions constitute the point of departure for justifying the method of gathering the data based on which knowledge can be gained on the realities in communist Poland's prisons. The choice of autobiographical techniques of collection of data that enable reconstruction of violence applied towards convicts is primarily founded on the crucial argument that archival prison-related documents comprise scarce information on violence used against inmates and such that would enable us to completely reconstruct the social climate of those places in the period of interest here.¹⁴ The basic reason behind the gap to be filled is that in the bygone political system, especially in the 1980s, penitentiary establishments grappled with considerable personnel scarcities. It was the time when facilities were filled up with inmates, both of the criminal and political sort. Prison authorities sought for various ways of encouraging job-seekers to join the officer staff. For example, every member of staff of the Łódź detention ward who had successfully recruited a new employee could count on an attractive financial bonus.¹⁵ Yet, negative selection prevailed; the officers, unqualified and poorly educated, all too often resorted to pretty destructive methods of coping with the bothering problems and frustration, notably alcohol and violence. Staffing problems and rotation of penitentiary personnel caused that disciplinary procedures, let alone precise evidencing of infringements or transgressions in the staff's

¹² Jerzy Eisler, 'Refleksje nad wykorzystywaniem relacji jako źródła w badaniu historii PRL: rozmowy z dysydentami i prominentami', *Polska 1944/45–1989: Studia i Materiały*, 6 (2004), 49–64.

¹³ See Thompson, *The Voice*.

¹⁴ Cf. Kozłowski, *Bunt w bydgoskim*.

¹⁵ Szczepanik and Soboński, 'Status społeczno-zawodowy funkcjonariusza Służby Więziennej w Polsce'.

work, was not in the interest of prison officials. There is evidence that complaints submitted by the convicts ended up unconsidered. To give an example, the author of a samizdat publication from the eighties, himself a 'political' prisoner who shared a cell with the 'criminal' ones, reports on a 'kite' note describing the situation of a 'stubborn' inmate who was severely beaten by an officer and endeavours to submit an official complaint to the institution's officials. As a result of excessive bureaucratised procedure, the complaint could not be considered as it reached the warden too late and so 'ceased to be valid anymore'.¹⁶ The note's author describes the officers' pathological behaviours towards the inmates, quoting the names and dates, and describing what happened in detail; he comes to the following conclusion:

an insensate and inefficient mechanism, governed by the rule that 'nothing ever happens' There are no guilty ones, ever; what may happen is a temporary setback, and some records and reports have to be made, the cell needs being sealed for a couple of days, the Deployment Section to receive a new recommendation – and everything assumes the once-and-forever determined order: an order of paperwork and pretence underneath which human humiliation, blood, and death are irreversibly concealed.¹⁷

The documentation produced by these institutions was meant to confirm the staff's efficiency in the perception of the prison authorities, whereas official materials recorded no lapses in the relations with inmates, no trace of the officers' pathological conduct. If any such item ever appeared, it was nothing beyond a vague statement or

¹⁶ Entitled *List z ulicy Smutnej*, the document, written *hic et nunc*, was originally published as a samizdat. It was a 'kite' letter delivered to the family by Józef Śreniowski, a Łódź dissident who was kept in the 1980s at the local detention ward in Smutna (meaning 'sad' in Polish) Street and was punished by moving from the ward subjected to the Security Service (SB) to a criminals cell. He consequently witnessed considerable abuses of the staff, particularly with respect to juvenile criminals, and of their impunity; he also saw how the penitentiary institution's officials downplay the problem and how drunkenness and violence of officers was acquiesced in. The letter is kept today in the collection of J. Piłsudski Municipal Library in Łódź. Renata Szczepanik has interviewed Mr. Śreniowski on the circumstances behind the letter and on what happened later (she holds a transcript of the interview). See *List z ulicy Smutnej*, ser. 'Biblioteka Biuletynu Łódzkiego' (Łódź, 1990), 13.

¹⁷ *List z ulicy Smutnej*, 10.

recommendation.¹⁸ Hence, using the memory of the victims of denial of human rights in Polish penitentiaries, the institutions separated with doors tightly sealed from the public opinion's sight and external controls, seems to be a significantly credible method of cognising the penitentiary realities of the time. Hence, it has to be accepted that the memory of inmates of communist Poland's penitentiary institutions gains the status of a testimony.

The present research was conducted at penitentiary establishments between 2011 and 2017 as part of two scientific projects, dealing respectively with criminals' careers and the experience of having an imprisoned parent while still a child.¹⁹ The data presented below are mainly based on narrative autobiographical interviews, sixty-four in total. Our attention has been drawn by the fact that in some (nine, to be specific) of the interviews a strongly remarked fragment of the reconstructed events concerns the imprisonment in the 1980s, including confinement in custody suites. The material came from multiple recidivists who were aged between fifty and seventy-five when the research project was conducted. The relevant information cropped up spontaneously in the course of interviews covering the interviewees' whole life. The events in question left a remarkable trace in their life histories, and while reconstructed, clearly triggered emotion and reflections, so the problem attracted our attention and we resolved to gather more testimonies of the events from recidivists. However, collecting the relevant material turned up to be not an easy task. Although initially the prospective interviewees (that is, recidivists with a record of imprisonment in the eighties) showed interest and declared cooperation, not all of them finally decided to express their past experiences. The difficulty in acquiring the material was partly owed to the fact that individuals with recurring criminal inclination are very poorly competent as far as entering public discourse is concerned. The other factors of significance include poor education, low narrative skills and, not infrequently, abnormalities caused by long years of alcoholic or drug addiction. Their distance with respect to the project

¹⁸ Szczepanik and Soboński, 'Status społeczno-zawodowy funkcjonariusza Służby Więziennej w Polsce'.

¹⁹ The course and outcome of the study is discussed in Szczepanik, *Stawanie się*. The other project is to be concluded with a doctoral thesis being prepared by Angelika Cieślukowska-Ryczko at the Institute of Sociology, University of Łódź, entitled *Adult children of prisoners. An analysis of biographical experience*.

was moreover caused by self-stigmatisation and was strongly correlated with the conviction about their own incredibility and self-definition as persons whose words are always doubted and whose testimony is regarded as valueless and unimportant. The suffering caused by imprisonment cannot be legitimised; the convicts and their families cannot count on understanding of their problems or support (after all, they 'have deserved their situation').

The reserved attitude toward the project was also due to a specific, 'here and now'-oriented pragmatism displayed by the recidivists. What we mean is a deliberate (and even directly articulated) assumption of a safeguarded attitude which was meant to produce a good image for use of the officers.²⁰ As an example, seeking to justify their unwillingness to join the projects, some of the recidivists explained their refusal by the sense of specific loyalty towards the officers, presently off duty, and members of their families (including children).

The problem with acquiring data from recidivists has always been connected with the officers' ambivalent attitude towards the research. While some saw in analyses of this sort an opportunity to improve of the image of today's Prison Service, in juxtaposition with the negative facet of the formation in the bygone political and social era, others doubted about the reasonableness of the project and its ultimate purport.

Additional information was finally acquired thanks to a dual form of the material evoked by the authors and generated *post factum* concerning the prison experiences in the last decade of communist Poland. Two persons have prepared extensive descriptions of their prison biographies, one of which deserves special attention as it entirely concerns the imprisonment served during the martial law by a man aged below twenty for thefts and banditry. Prepared over several months, the description includes vast amounts of detail (and spans 1.5 publisher's sheets in the standardised version). Moreover, four thematic notes were produced (a page or two of concise reconstruction of the violence situations experienced).²¹

For the present purpose, fragments taken from the above-described material are marked 'I' (narrative interview), 'N' (note), and 'B' (written prison autobiographies). Whenever fragments of this material

²⁰ Szczepanik, *Stawanie się*.

²¹ The material being referred to is possessed by Renata Szczepanik.

are quoted, the original spelling has purposefully been preserved. We have decided not to intervene in the formula of the utterances, whether written or oral.

III

PRISON OFFICERS' VIOLENCE TOWARDS PRISONERS AS AN INSTRUMENT OF BUILDING AND REINFORCING THE DEPENDENCE AND SUBORDINATION RELATIONS

The dominant form of violence that was experienced by the narrators was physical violence which was often used at the very beginning, as part of the 'welcoming ceremony' as the inmate entered the facility. In the reconstructed events, the interlocutors emphasised how negative and grievous the convict's first contact with the facility staff was. Interestingly, what they actually communicate is that the encounter with the Prison Service officers was more oppressive, triggering anxiety and apprehension, compared to the effect of 'entry into a total institution' as a space of isolation with clear physical and symbolical restrictions. Although appearing in the form of corporal violence, the inmate's initiation on the facility's premises primarily set the emblematic divisions based on articulate antagonisms. The attitude toward the prisoner, and the common practice of beating the newcomer inmates, served to designate and establish their low, indeed reified, position.

The famous Iława... The greeting at the gate in Iława was a ... a greeting, starting with beating, obviously. [1]

The form and character of the accounts quoted herein are worth noting. On the one hand, the narrators reconstruct their personal experiences in the form of autobiographical testimonies²², whilst on the other, their stories combine the dimensions of 'private' and 'common' memory that helps build an image of the given group's past, based upon observations and exchanges of information beyond the official

²² Owing to the specificity of severe experiences, the autobiographies in question might have been based on nostalgic memory, a subjectivised point of view and extreme emotions. On nostalgic memory see Marek Zalewski, *Formy pamięci* (Gdańsk, 2004), 100.

institutionalised channels of communication.²³ Thus, the narrators' testimonies make up a sum of personal biographies and observations of their co-inmates who share their fate, rather than being pieces of singular (peculiar, individual) experience. This becomes clear based on the following excerpt, where the narrator becomes the direct victim of violence and witnesses the personnel's actions towards the other inmates that reveal clear traces acts of physical abuse. The narrators thereby flag up to their pervading sense of inevitability of 'unearned punishment' and oppression.

Year 1986, arrival at PI [Penal Institution] X. ... The admission was horrible. Many officers with dogs Several hours later, they brought us over to the argot-speakers²⁴ and then a greater quantity of those persons did not speak the argot. I can remember what they looked like. Battered, their backs and legs beaten blue with batons. [N]

Violence was chiefly associated with supraindividual actions of the Prison Service (non-symmetrical relation of a single inmate positioned against a group of guards). In the narrators' accounts, the tormentor usually assumed a 'collective form'. Cruel and afflictive as they were, the violence tactics employed (beating prisoners while insentient, use of various objects in order to escalate the pain and make the punishment even more severe) did not rank among particularly sophisticated forms of violence, let us note. On the contrary – being a display of strength and superiority, they appeared merely brutal and primitive.

²³ See Bartosz Korzeniewski, *Transformacja pamięci. Przewartościowania w pamięci przeszłości a wybrane aspekty funkcjonowania dyskursu publicznego o przeszłości w Polsce po 1989 roku* (Poznań, 2010), 40–5.

²⁴ Denoting an informal gang of inmates, being an element of the hidden life of Polish penitentiary institutions. Such organisations dynamically developed and gained in importance in Polish penitentiary institutions in the 1960s to 1980s. The subculture [referred in the prison slang as *grypsujący* – basically meaning those who can 'speak the argot' (the verb being *grypsować*)] was regarded by its members as the top caste in the prison community (cf. Marek M. Kamiński, *Games Prisoners Play: The Tragicomic Worlds of Polish Prison* [Princeton, 2010]). The gang determined the behaviours of the entire inmate community, managing the social relations based on a strictly determined code. The basic rules included group solidarity, readiness to help one another, and aversion towards the prison administration (cf. Kozłowski, *Bunt w bydgoskim*, 125).

... I was going with this convoy and had a real fear. I did fear, 'cause I knew what I could expect there, at the entry. ... I tell you what, the jailers would pound you with whatever they had, kick those already floored. They were strong, you know, 'cause they took one inmate and closed themselves up next door and the whole heard could beat him, kick him, and so on. [W] I was called to what was named 'the grille' – there were several screws, and they started gabbing – disparaging, having me as a target. Mr X turned up, he was on duty then. He took the cap off his head, put it on the wardrobe, hanged his overcoat. He came up to me – I even didn't realise he'd bang me on the head straight away, my nose directly. I fell and was blood-stained – and got a kicking. A few minutes later they told me to stand up and wash myself in the sink, and so I waited on 'the grille' till the shift ended. Then I heard from X, ['don't you fuckin' mess up, or else I'll punch the shit off you, every time, you remember that till you're here[']. From 'the grille' back to the cells, the nose swollen as it was broken, in the cell most of them readily knew who the perpetrator was. I didn't even have to say a word, and they started, ['what's that, X got to you, right?['], and I replied, ['yes[']. They assured me there's no point kicking off with him, for ['he can kick your ass for free. Better avoid him[']. [B]

Apart from direct physical violence, practices are discernible of stimulating a steadily increasing sense of expectation and tense. The grievous acts such as beating and kicking were accompanied by minor physical repressive measures applied to reinforce and sustain the inmates' dependence and need to submit to the 'prison power'. Subjected to such measures, prisoners learned how to behave 'appropriately', thus (possibly) minimising the risk of conflicts or punishments. Again, at this point, the phenomenon of memory is worth of our attention in these reconstructed histories, where the narrator gives an account of unofficial knowledge communicated by his more experienced co-inmates. The dependence position was not only enforced by the facility officers or administrators but was further reinforced in the interactions between the inmates – by giving 'good advice', explaining to the new inmates the irrational behaviours of the Service members, and the like.

My first contact with 'Cannibal': 'Name?' I'm telling him my name, and he's dragging the keys across my ribs at that very moment. I looked in astonishment ... [A co-mate] says to me, 'You'll get used, 'cause he likes it this way. He says it's his way to say good day to a thief for the whole new day'. [I]

The violence-based relations between the inmates and the facility administration influenced the interpretation, understanding, and experiencing the place, with all its specificity. The guards exhibited certain attributes, thus adding to the oppression apparatus. The bunch of keys was one such item. Let us note that the key, as an instrument of violence, appears in these stories in a dual form – as a physical source of threat (the practice of beating with a key, so often described by the prisoners) and a symbol of menace. In the following account, the key placed in the door flap becomes an awesome ‘attribute’, heralding a real hazard or, simply, physical pain:

The sound of the key in the flap works as a respirator to agitate your heart. That’s what it’s been doing to me right until now. And though I know this is not going to be done to me in a prison anymore, hearing the sound of the wicket getting opened up, I’m getting my heart beating faster and faster. Then, [it’s] of fear and anxiety that something bad may happen. [B]

Such reminiscences have repeatedly been fixed in the narrators’ minds, exerting an effect on their further social and emotional functioning, and, importantly, on their attitude toward, and perception of, the institution concerned in general. Recidivists, for that matter, have tended to hold a solidified negative image of penitentiary institution, inimical attitude towards the prison officials and officers, permanent conviction about the unfairness of their punishment, and so forth.

Ooh, I did get a licking in my life, got a licking in my life, ooh... But I won’t forget what they did, uuuh... You will never forget what you’ve been through, till you die. [I]

Given the circumstances, it is hard to point out to any educative methods being employed – such that would have helped bring about social rehabilitation. The acts of the prison staff were based, above all, on abuses against inmates. Prison officials and officers unjustifiably employed disciplinary punishments all too often. Apart from direct physical violence, almost all the narrators ‘reminisce’ and reconstruct their experience of what was called the ‘hard bed’. This form of punishment consisted in putting the inmate in a specially adapted separate cell without the basic amenities; the only privilege allotted to the confined individual was a ‘bedding’ made of hard planks on which the prisoner could rest in the night. The abuses stemmed from

no fixed time prescribed for this form of punishment: the prisoner would be put into such room, and his (her) confinement extended, on no justified grounds. Another 'educational measure' was placing the inmate in isolation cells or unjustified 'shaving him (her) bald'.

Then, they'd go for solitary confinement; or if not, the hard bed instead. A week, ten days, two weeks... Damn, well, he would stay there lying, young he was, so what, huh. And if not, then he flung insults several times, and be placed for a month, three months of separate cells ... [I]

The cell was situated downstairs, in the side corridor, which led to the bogs where you went to do the expositions.²⁵ It was very cold, humid and dark there. There were blinds²⁶ in the windows, solid bars²⁷, and on the entrance door, tiger-bars on the inside. There were two plank-beds inside. You were given there just one blanket, and this for the night only. During the day I was not supposed to lie down, even on the floor, let alone the plank-bed. When the screw looked through the Judas hole he always screamed ['face the wall!'], this meant that I had to turn and face the wall, not even being allowed to sit on the stool. The cell was never heated because the screws never allowed the hall boy [corridor attendant] fire up the stove. Let me mention that Pułtusk R.C. [Remand Centre] is a former convent. The cells there were heated from the furnace. There was half a bucket of coal [used] within the whole day. There was no firing on the hard bed [and] it was enormously cold. In spite of the chill you felt, you anyway dreamed about the evening to come so you could be given the one longed-for blanket, so that you could have at least a few minutes' sleep and feel relieved after the whole day of exhaustion. The relief was often illusory, because the chill backed down after some time anyway. [The narrator actually means that the cold took the upper hand. – transl. note]. The dilemma which followed was, 'cover yourself, or, lie down on the blanket', for the hard planks were raising [their] head. [B]

... the bed was padlocked, it was a typical plank-bed that was locked for the day. I could only take one towel and a piece of soap into the cell. The mattresses, blankets, the jacket, the cap, footwear (gaiters) were all left in the cellar corridor on a wooden bench. [B]

²⁵ The procedure of 'exposition' (Polish, *wystawka*) is explained in the account excerpt quoted below (starting with "This was a small room ...") on p. 227.

²⁶ The word (Polish *blindy*) denotes the window screens, usually made of metal, fixed on the outer side of the window. Made mainly of plexiglas today, in communist Poland they were made of light-tight glass with metal wires embedded inside.

²⁷ *Tygrysowa* in Polish (slang term) refers to the massive bars fixed on the inside of the isolation cell. The bars at the window blocked the inmate's access to the window; the bars at the door formed a barrier between the entrance door and the room's inside.

IV
OFFICERS MANAGING POOR SOCIAL CONDITIONS
IN VIOLENCE-BASED RELATIONSHIPS

The social climate of penitentiary institutions was determined not only by the imposed discipline based on direct violence from the officers and the severity of 'educative penalties': the social and living as well as sanitary conditions had quite a say too. These conditions were very poor in most of the communist Poland's penitentiaries.

Sentenced to imprisonment, the convicts exchanged experiences from their previous imprisonments already when transported to the assigned facility, evaluating the conditions there as poor or very poor; this was strongly linked to their assessment of the discomforts and hardships they were about to suffer:

Everybody was concocting in his own way 'bout where we'd be going – and the fact we were juvenile, prisons were named such as Iława, Mielęcin, Sieradz. I got fear, was awaiting the unknown again, each of the prisons was known for something, not in a good sense ... and, which prison is sewerred and which not yet. [B]

Many of the penitentiary institutions were installed in former monastery buildings or adapted for their purposes the prison rooms from the pre-war period. Most of the prisons and custodies in use in the early eighties were built in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. Cells in the old prisons were tight and dirty, the walls covered with mould. The relatively small windows let small amounts of fresh air in; also the view outside was restricted due to additional protective screens installed.²⁸

Overpopulated facilities (causing the need to pack excessive numbers of inmates into the cells and no space available for sleeping), small unventilated rooms, non-disinfected blankets used by previous inmates and toilets with no sewerage facilities: accumulated, all these factors caused extremely hard existential conditions. In the summertime, inmates swooned or fainted at times due to excessive heat, while contagious diseases spread.

²⁸ Cf. Tomasz Kozłowski, 'Fale protestów więziennych 1981–1989', in Natalia Jarska and Jan Olaszek (eds.), *Spółczesność polskie w latach 1980–1989* (Warszawa, 2015).

... it was even tighter [there] than at Pułtusk, squashed in like sardines. When you needed to get through in the night to do the lavatory, the thing of certainty was that you would tread on somebody sleeping on the floor – we slept there one right next to the other ... During the summer, in the cell, the head and stuffy air was unbearable, the blinds in the windows did not let as much air as was needed – it was stuffy, I can remember the cell number – 29, there was twenty-four of use the inmates, with eighteen beds provided only – three rounds each upwards, the rest slept on mattresses on the floor, you couldn't thrust your leg forward. It was even hard to make your way to the bomb [i.e. portable water closet] in the night to take a leak, and that was nightmarish. I can remember now the stink from those bombs – chloride was poured into them, when you opened it to pee, the first thing that struck you was the stench of the urine and the chloride burning the eyes. ... The bath [was] once a week, however many of us were in the cell, fifteen or thirty-six, or forty-two, we always had ten minutes, and there were ten shower-baths as I can remember today. Struggling with time ... it was there that I first ever learned what lice, bedbugs, and pubic lice is. It also hunted me down that I was shaven bald, I looked like a convict from a concentration camp. ... I couldn't sleep. So hot, and, added to that, the mate next to me was strongly coughing. Out it turned then that he was moved to the hospital on tuberculosis [treatment]. I couldn't sleep because, apologies for my sincerity, I had scabies and felt my body itching. [B].

First, I scratched the mould off the blanket. [I]

The cell was very dark and gloomy, horrible odour, stink of tobacco being smoked. Blinds in the windows, one bulb was lit, the light was very poor. [B]

It was unbearably hot in the cells in the summer, whereas chill prevailed in the winter. Stores were fired in the old prison buildings. 'Heat' was rationed not only to make savings. It was a tool of sophisticated violence – which was efficient, as far as triggering extreme stress experience related to the potential victim's (fear of) hypothermia.

The cell was not heated 'cause the screws did not allow the hall boy to stoke. ... I heard at the assembly [someone saying] 'no blanket to the fuckin' ass'. I remember it like it was today, it was X [quotes the 'screw's' pseudonym]. I knew I'll be freezing in a moment, bloody cube²⁹, so I only

²⁹ "Let me explain what the cube [*kostka*] is. Every day after the evening assembly the prison garments, as we possessed no other, and that is, the blouse and the trousers, were 'folded into cube' on the prison stools. The cube [was] 25 cm times 25 cm and was put out into the corridor, right outside the cell; until the morning assembly call, these things were outside the cell in the corridor." [B]

will have my pants left on and a thin shirt, with no blanket, of course ... Sometimes there was a screw [...] [quotes pseudonym] right on duty, so was he called – and he was a butcher. He did it the way that he did not beat physically, but could open the feeder in the flap and leave it like that. The first time, I thought I was all right, an hour – after [some] time it turned out he was doing it deliberately for it was getting really cool in the cell – everything’s blown out, piercing cold. [B]

I was left there – a dozen minutes later, I began feeling very cold, damn fucking cold. Now, I can realise what the purpose was of me being moved from pavilion three into two. It was shit cold in there, and damp, awful damp – these sounds³⁰ were horrible, like a fridge. Some time after, my teeth were playing melodies, not to be restrained. I made efforts to somehow hunch up and keep the warmth inside me, this was helpful for a couple of minutes. [B]

The most poignant experience in the narrators’ recollections is the hunger overwhelming in late communist Poland’s prisons (“The worst thing, though, was the hunger that prevailed in the prison in that time, not to mention on the hard bed” [I]). The economic conditions of the time did cause considerable impediments in acquiring foodstuffs by Polish consumers in general, and the situation in penitentiary institutions seemed extremely dramatic.

The flap opens – I report, [‘]take the supper in[’] – in the corridor on the stool there’s a mug of coffee, bread and margarine. At last, something that gives you pleasure, the food. I liked the time – I always counted then how they have sliced my portion of bread, into two or three slices – I preferred it into three, ’cause I would eat up two immediately and one just before sleep. ... I can remember that in Pułtusk, *ceres* was always given to spread it on the bread. There was some sort of margarine which was tough to spread. There were moments when a spoonful of marmalade was slung in, and that was a delicacy ... Until very now my stomach is clenching and my jaws move with anger when I’m recalling the hunger from Pułtusk, Białogłeka and Sieradz. [B]

Managing poor social conditions and treating them as instruments of violence was not reduced to the poor or insufficient food supplies delivered to inmates, though. It was common practice with penitentiary establishments of the late communist Poland that the small meal portions were still diminished, and those prisoners who required

³⁰ The narrator refers a solitary confinement facility.

being punished (for whatever reason) had the parcels received from their families taken away by the prison staff.

Hunger was griping in the prison then, you could receive a food parcel [of] three kilograms, but this is only a theory. The bulls' practice was such that every inmate would receive, at least once a month, a motion for disciplinary punishment. The first punishment the governor imposed was deprivation of a food parcel. And thus everybody was devoid of his parcel. Today, it might seem inconceivable to some, but what you could buy for the money the family has sent you was just stationery and hygiene items. [B]

Convicts punished with 'hard bed' or isolation cell had meals and access to food restricted in a particularly drastic manner.

A leaf of soup a day, and that's it. Once in a day, a leaf of soup and this is all. But there's more to it, if the soup was so-so at least... But that was water... A pottage, of beetroots or something. I don't know what they made it of, tasteless at all. But that's a gang, a gang of roughnecks, end of story... [I] Meals were served on small plastic plates and we ate them with a long wooden spoon. The sense of hunger and fear of lack of bread has been with me until today. Every time before you exited the cell you had to declaim the report. The report was more or less this: 'Convict no. 105 (you did not say your name, just the number of the isolation cell you served the punishment), checking in at the isolation cell in the course of serving his punishment of three months for (for instance) having beaten an inmate. I moreover check in with the request for being dispensed the meal.' This was followed by the command 'Run!', and we were getting, running, to the very end of the corridor, and now, already with the meal, we had to be quickly back in the cell. [B]

The poor sanitary and living conditions – hunger, frigidity, excessive heat, dirt, sicknesses and physical emaciation of the organism remembered by the inmates – are highlighted in all the requested accounts of everyday life in the bygone political system. Our attention is particularly attracted by the fact that instead of diminishing the hardships, the officers managed the dramatic conditions of physical existence and approached them as a specific tool of power and submission as well as educative and disciplining effort.

There were weird punishments, so you could receive fourteen days of hard bed [combined] with going to work. Frozen and drowsy, you were cheap labour force then anyway. [B]

'Cause I cannot remember exactly, let's assume what were the general norms, eh? Well, over one day, and the norm was, one hundred and twenty of those, those uniforms to sew... rolled off the production [line]... Quite a quantity, that, indeed... At large... Since, if they've made, let's say, fifty, fifty-five, some sixty – uuuh, that was a success... If, erm, they've rolled off the machines... And how 'bout the prison? One hundred and twenty was still not enough. That was still not enough... And, well, you had to do it, 'cause if you didn't... Didn't meet the standard, the report... The report's sent off. The report, you could just... Forget the report, nobody's taking it home, right? But the report was received by the governor... And, the governor imposed punishments. He took the food parcels away. [I]

Accumulated, the conditions such as permanent hunger, hypothermia while simultaneously making (underage!) inmates work hard or practice sport exercises all led to physical emaciation. The disciplining procedures and educative methods employed were perverse in their logic of action. For instance, failure to reach the imposed labour target owing to weakened organism and deteriorated effort-making efficiency was subject to punishment of reduced food ration and hard bed. The disciplining was thus done through intensified adverse effect of the conditions that essentially had directly caused poorer output. To improve physical health of young inmates, the males famished and impaired by illness were supposed to make intense physical exercise.

Every day before the compulsory walk there was the drill, that is, push-ups, squats, and running. Many of us were falling, too weak to run off to the walking yard. [B]

When they wanted to soften someone, he would land on the hard bed and could well have his meal ration reduced by a half. Just figure it out. They gave us too little food to live but too much to die. Those tormentors were able to employ SS-like methods, like Hitler did in the extermination camps: hunger and cold at work. [I]

The convicts' accounts go as far as emphatically comparing their physical and psychical situations to the conditions that prevailed in concentration and gulag camps, the officers being referred to as 'Gestapo torturers', 'Hitlerite hangmen', or tormentors using 'Stalinist methods'. Apart from posing a threat to the convicts' physical health, the poor social and living conditions, obliging the inmates to wear

worn and torn, ragged and dirty prison clothes, heavily contributed to their psychological degradation.

I'm going out, and I have to put on [one of those] jackets hanging in the corridor and the prison cap ... this was a heavy and grey attire – the cap was no different at all from those which were in the concentration camps – just only the grey rather than being stripped. They nowise protected against cold, but wearing it was obligatory in that time. The same thing was about footwear, you just received a pair of old gaiters and I would advise all the folks against disputing that they're stinking 'cause someone was using them before us. What you had to do was apparel, no discussion. At the time, sickness like athlete's foot, scabies and emphysema, already known among the elder recidivists, gastric ulcers, [appeared] in prisons. The most widespread illnesses in prison in those years. [B]

... I was given an old rag, stretching almost to my knees – it stank with naphthalene, a grey cap, weird one – all was far from custom-made. [B]

Facets of penitentiary violence can also be traced in the way the medical care was managed. It sometimes happened that convicts mutilated themselves or attempted suicide – this having been the only 'efficient' form of defending themselves against the extremely physically and psychically devastating disciplining conditions or a chance to discontinue the torture experienced in the 'bygone system' prisons. ("I was among those who went through the humiliation and I mutilated myself in defence against it, however after a surgery and with my wounds stitched at the local hospital – I was thrown again onto the isolation cell's floor. My second suicidal attempt cut the punishment short." [B]). In such cases, medical operations were intentionally performed without the inmate being administered an anaesthetic. ("The self-inflicted man has no right to receive any anaesthetic after being operated on. He has to feel what pain is." [B]).

Dissemination of illnesses was facilitated by overpopulation, emaciation of the organism through hard labour, hypothermia or overheating, malnourishment, and also by the fact that the sick were kept together with the healthy instead of being separated.

Coughing was only heard in the night, I could see him spit blood when coughing. ... At Mokotów there was a whole pavilion at that time of such tuberculous lads. [I]

Had a stomach bug? Then cure yourself... 'Aspirin' ... he walked out, 'provisioned'. The doctor just wrote, 'provisioned', 'Aspirin, provisioned', and

that's it... I once had a miracle when he added, er, 'vitamin C, provisioned' and... I had to treat myself, and that's what one did... Take an onion, overturned... a jar, and you twisted it, and made a syrup, yea. [I]

Other basic needs of the convicts were no less subject to subjugation. The organisation of prison life was inclined toward providing inhuman conditions for observance of basic rules of hygiene and physical health. The sanitary conditions prevailing in the then-unsewered prison facilities were dramatic and directly oriented toward deprivation of basic human physiological needs; in fact, they were employed to humiliate the inmates. This purpose was served not only by the condition of sanitary facilities and the technical solutions used: also the prisoner's body was subjected to a strict rhythm imposed by the personnel's organisation of work (the need to satisfy the call of nature at the assigned moment, hastily and in presence of others).

This was a small room, on both sides opposite to each other in the floors there were holes in the concrete, filled with excrements. The co-inmates pulled their trousers and pants down to the knees, each of them squatted opposite to the other and started defecating. They were merely forty, fifty centimetres from each other. ... The stench was horrible, there were eight such squat-spots, four on the one side and four on the other side. One group finished, the other one sat down. ... the stench was unbearable ... We were led into a room where enormous stench struck [us], and that was the toilet. The so-called 'expositions' [*wystawkas*] were held there. The idea was that the 'bombs' were emptied of urine and faeces. You filled the buckets with water so that the water could be taken to the cell and be enough until the following day, fourteen or fifteen-hundred hours. For the fifteen people, this is how many of us were in the cell, and we have two pails of water. The pails were ten, twelve litres of volume. We had to wash ourselves in it, and also wash the dishes which we had used for our meal. Our washing was done in the way that one of us poured water from a mug onto his hands and we were washing over the bowl – obviously, just the face and the hands, the legs were out of the question: we wouldn't have had enough water. [B]

The painfulness of so wretched living conditions was reinforced by the officers' behaviours. The convicts have reconstructed the drastic course and consequences of the events organised by the prison personnel as part of 'disciplining punishing', which in fact were retaliatory and were applied to humiliate the 'ward' to a maximum degree possible.

But the worst moments came twice in a week, on Tuesday and Friday, when the faeces tanks (so-called 'bombs') placed in the cells were emptied (the X prison had no sewerage facilities at the time). 'Tough characters' were broken down then, and many of us, having been given a battering, were thrown into a large 'sink' into which excrements were poured. [B] One day, I started demanding that he [i.e. the guard] let me do the 'exposition', since when on the hard bed, even the 'bomb' was separated with 'tiger-bars'. So it relied on his good will if I could pee at last. When I started shouting that I must go to the pot, shit on your scone, he said. I started banging on the grid and shouting so I be released, 'cause I can't keep it anymore. He wouldn't let me off, this is nasty to write but I relieved myself in the cell, I couldn't hang in. The wicket opened after some time, there were a few screw standing there, they were disparaging me horribly, [']you fucking shit, now you'll devour this shit and your cant [here, basically meaning his being part of the inmate community] comes to an end[']. ... And I heard, [']clean it up with your hands, you fucking shit['], I refused and got a licking again. And I was left like that till the morning. [B]

V

HOW CONVICTS DEALT WITH VIOLENCE

With the wave of socio-political change at the outset of the 1980s, the awareness of their dramatic situation and human rights being violated was growing among criminal prisoners (their direct contacts with 'political' inmates was an additional factor). Based on analysis of the gathered testimonies, it becomes apparent that the convicted had no chance to use a constructive response to the abuses or to resist the violence. Altogether, four forms of response need being identified.

First, inmates endeavoured to make use of the internal procedures enabling to submit complaints against misbehaviours of the officers. Regrettably, it was the personnel only that held the monopoly for 'truth' penitentiaries of the 'epoch bygone'. In the relations with the convicts, tactics of reinforcing the officers' impunity were reinforced through ostentatious ascription of incredibility of the inmate in his confrontation with the abusers. Another strategy employed by the prison administration was sluggishness of action and piled-up bureaucracy within which inmates' complaints were 'perishing' or time-barred.³¹ In his historical monograph on Polish penitentiary system in the 1970s and early 1980s, Tomasz Kozłowski so addresses the issue:

³¹ See *List z ulicy Smutnej*.

The prisoners had no legal protection. Moreover, resulting from the purposeful policy of the authorities they were often unaware of what rights were vested in them. Even if they resolved to write complaints against the conditions in which they served time or against aggressive conduct of the guards, a definite majority of such complaints were rejected not because of some lies or distortions they might have contained but due to the defective system of internal control in penitentiary establishments.³²

It sometimes happened that a prisoner was communicated his powerlessness and deprived of any chance for suing his rights. The sense of powerlessness or impotence caused that the convicts evinced deep hatred towards concrete officers and towards penitentiary officials and officers in totality. The asymmetric distribution of strength and power, on the one hand, and the situation in which the prisoner wages an uneven battle, doomed to failure as it was, against the violent staff, and the consequences of such attempts, are illustrated by the following biographical fragment:

It made my blood boil when the swine lied that I affronted him. When I started explaining [to the correction officer] that it was not so, I heard, 'if the ward attendant writes that you were illegally riding a bike across the ward, then I'll trust him and not you, stinker. You've been punished with a disciplinary penalty, and even if you're not temporarily detained anymore but sentenced with a punishment is [i.e. implies the punishment of] one month in separation cell.' I can remember it like it was yesterday: I began feeling hatred towards all the screws, the whole motherfucking Service. On that day, all who worked there became my greatest enemies. I started considering them the meanest maggots that I hated. [B]

I was disembarked on the solitary confinement cells in pavilion two. I stayed there for a month, and in that time I had a few talks with the psychologist, a lady. The subject was constantly belaboured of whether [officer] X actually intended to aggrieve me ... I think that if not for my broken arm and nose, they'd have filed a case against me and make everything up their own way, making me the villain of everything. [B]

In terms of achieving their goals – such as discontinued use of a particularly humiliating punishment – self-mutilation and suicidal attempts were fairly efficient. Sometimes, such drastic forms were the only instrument of physical resistance that was available to the inmates. Besides, it was a destructive tool of abreaction and a method

³² Kozłowski, *Bunt w bydgoskim*, 208.

to discharge negative emotion. Suicide was the most dramatic way of coping – or, in fact, of failing to cope – with the violence, humiliation and impotence experience. Nonetheless, rather than being defined by the Prison Service in terms of, say, the inmate's response to the frustration or consequent of his depression, all and any acts of self-aggression were qualified as instrumental behaviour stemming from demoralisation; otherwise, they were associated with the inmate's affiliation with a prison subculture.

All that was unbearable – the cold, my thoughts were such that I'd freeze over. I took a piece of razor out of my mouth and [said] to myself that I must cut myself. I wanted to slit my wrists but it was no good, the handcuffs prevented it. I knew I had to do it well, 'cause if not, these torturers will be hitting me all night long and I've had it. Honestly, my intentions were very much though over: doing all this to myself – so, self-mutilating – I want[ed] to avoid more beating. ... I repeat it, once more, stronger – feeling the blood flow – it's warm – I've never comprehended it. ... But with my body injured, I always felt relieved, once. Today, I would never harm myself as I feel fear, I didn't feel it then before I injured myself. I feel blissful a few minutes after – the state of 'kick' is already known to me – thoughts are with me that let'em get fucked now, care not a hang 'bout them. The cold is going away and I'm growing indifferent to whatever might happen – 'tis a bit weird but makes me feel sweet – sweet and fucking enjoyable. ... I often did so when in such tough and powerless situations, would mutilate myself with just anything. I'd cut my veins on the forearms – and the throat, sometimes it happened too. The emotion came out right on the spot. [B] And, how many people took their lives themselves! Couldn't keep up with the pace, well, losing their tempers. Nobody ever spoke about it ... That there's no-one to say about it, that it goes into oblivion. Hard, quite hard it was... Many, many people, the... wretchedly, wretchedly perished ... threw themselves under cars. [I]

I didn't feel them being kicked by them anymore, because I thought when I go to the cell then I'll take the blanket and make a noose and get swinging to and fro ... I cut myself ... 'self-infliction', they put down in the papers ... 'self-infliction', 'self-infliction' – well, what else would you expect from a recidivist. Fuckin' insane, so he's cutting himself, init? [I]

Another method of convict response was the building and reinforcing the position of a specific symbolical territory of reciprocal sympathy in suffering, which was inaccessible to officers. The organisation of inmates within what was the institution's 'second life' was for them a place of consolidation in hatred towards the administration and

a space of regaining dignity, a psychological form of resistance against violence and coping with helplessness. But there was more to this organisation: it imposed informal rules that helped the other inmates achieve the benefits specific of the 'argot-speakers'. The organisation of informal prison life was regulated through aggression and violence.³³

A paradoxical situation emerged: for the penitentiary's authorities, combating the subculture was the actual purpose of employing violence against the convicts, and justified it. The staff analysed the operation of the prison subculture through the prism of characteristics that hindered the implementation of 'appropriate' educative effect and defined it in terms of escalated violence and risks of pathologies among inmates. From the standpoint of the latter, the violence they suffered from the officers owing to their participation in the subculture was, in a sense, 'getting it in reward for resisting' [I]. The subculture was a sort of mental isle in the prison geography to which access was barred to officers – to those who appropriated the convicts' bodies on a daily basis.

In the old years, argot-speaking was a scar for the penitentiary system. The whole communist system was apparently so ideal and so good, right? Whereas, those people at the correctional institution knew how to get organised, be mutually supportive and united. To cap it all, they were so smart that they have their own system of communication (knock-knocks, writing on hands, replacements) that for aliens being outsiders to the subculture then it was all foreign and incomprehensible. So, how could that be that the commies control the whole society, and out there, amidst [i.e. inside] the walls, a handful of criminals are getting out of their hand? ... The fact was, I got very strongly absorbed in the subculture for this was my way of rebelling [against the methods] applied by the bulls. I knew once whom I'm fighting against and why, that had a purpose and a sense. The people respected one another, helped one another. In these old times all the rules were the foundation of the argot-speaking [i.e. 'gang' membership] existing in the prison. If someone referred to mutual solidarity, you could really feel it at every turn. ... If you spoke the argot, caring one about

³³ The prison subculture in Polish penitentiary institutions has been an object of research and numerous studies. The phenomenon is multidimensional and subject to dynamic change. The present article refers to just one of its functions. For a detailed description of analysis of the issue in question, see (for instance) Kamiński, *Games Prisoners Play*.

the other was obligatory. The penitentiary staff was the common enemy. ... in spite of the adversities brought about by the administration, it was a worthy thing to stand up, rise your head up and say, 'Argot-speaker, me' [i.e., I belong to the 'gang']. I always did it with pride, for the very fact of saying this was unacceptable for the bulls, a discredit. This has now disappeared, you don't have it anymore ... democracy, different people, different ideas, objectives, priorities. The administration doesn't oppress you anymore, and the narcotics have done their job – there are different crimes, different values latent in people. [B]

Such a way of interpreting the importance of prison subculture functioning in communist Poland is confirmed by the situation of the penitentiary establishments operating today. The political transition brought about a radical positive change in the way imprisonment is organised and human rights respected in the conditions of confinement, the 'classical' prison subculture (the *grypsujący* – i.e. 'argot-speakers'/'gang members') has undergone a significant transformation. Although still reverberating in some facilities, its functions and importance to the convicts are different today compared to what it was in the communist time.³⁴

A group upsurge, of various kinds, was one more method of resistance ("At last, we rose and stood up to those prison officials" [I]). Rebellions among prisoners differed in direct reason and course. Group self-mutilation, hunger strikes or successful attempts to seize a part of the premises. Convicts also protested by refusing to obey the staff's commands or submit themselves to the daily regime, and by means of sit-in protest (refusing to leave a room).³⁵ Such forms of protest are recorded for different moments during the 1970s and 1980s as well as for the first years after the transition. Such acts always lead to a dramatic end, detrimental to the rebels – in spite of the mediators' promises to resolve the dispute peacefully.

The worst thing was when they subdued it and led us out to a walk and there we stood for a dozen hours, and water was poured on us from hydrants all the time. Every day they took a different group and a double row was made [i.e. we had to form one], we had to run as fast as we could, and the officers were beating us with batons and kicking ... I lost a front tooth when so running. I was battered with a baton grip. [N]

³⁴ See Szczepanik, *Stawanie się*.

³⁵ Kozłowski, *Bunt w bydgoskim*.

... after the rebellion at Nowogard, the screws hanged me on the bars and battered me as much as they could. The hanging itself was painful – they cuffed the hands on my back with two pairs of manacles – one pair on the wrists and the other on the elbows, and this is how they hanged on the bars. Thus the shoulders were twisted and the joints were creaking, and the torturers were battering. [N]

History has shown that there were attempts in late communist Poland to publicise abuses and drastic forms of violence employed against prisoners otherwise than in one of the above-described ways. One example was a *Memorial* penned by Emil Morgiewicz, who was sentenced to imprisonment for a ‘crime against the socialist system’. He prepared a detailed report on the situation of the imprisoned convicts in the former half of the seventies. As he received no answer from the Minister to whose attention the memorial and a request for intervention was addressed, Morgiewicz sent his report abroad. Although international attention did focus on the terrible realities with which Polish prisoners had to deal daily and in spite of significant human rights organisations getting involved, the action eventually did not end up in success, and Polish authorities eventually managed to gloss the problem over.³⁶

In the 1980s, the situation of ‘political’ prisoners differed from that of their ‘criminal’ counterparts. In custodies, it sometimes happened that the former were placed in the wards reporting to the Security Service [SB]. From the standpoint of a ‘typical’ criminal inmate, the conditions in such wards were much different from what they experienced; also the social climate, owed to the officers’ attitude, was more beneficial. Let us quote a biographical excerpt which attests it:

I was visited in the morning by a psychologist lady and declared after an initial talk that I would be placed at the MSW [= Ministry of Internal Affairs] pavilion. The pavilion was different from the others – no ‘criminals’ there, just the ‘political’. I was put into there, but not in a regular cell; it’s just that I was placed in a cell for the dangerous – a cell like in the solitary confinement units – the bed, mind you, was unlockable; the cell was a two-person cell – me, and one young lad I was kept there for two months or so. The pavilion was different from the other ones indeed. There was a horrible silence and nobody shouted through the windows to nobody else; for me,

³⁶ Adam F. Wojciechowski, ‘Memoriał o stanie więziennictwa w PRL’, *Zeszyty Historyczne* (Paryż), 159 (538) (2007), 201–32.

it was like, as if life was inexistent there at all. The bulls were, somehow, different from those I had met before: those in here did not provoke us by their attitude or vocabulary at all, and treated us as if in a more human manner. Frankly, I took a bit of break from fear and stress that something might happen right in a moment and that I may take a beating once again. I began getting a good contact with the psychologist – the lady brought me books to read every now and then. [1]

As opposed to the criminal inmates, the voice of ‘political’ inmates was credible; yet, their perception of the actual living conditions and Prison Service members’ abuses committed against the ‘criminals’ was not complete. If at all, political prisoners served only a part of their imprisonment with their criminal peers. But it was their testimony that allowed in the early days of the ‘Solidarity’ movement to slightly open the previously tightly closed doors of Polish prisons, which resulted in a temporary improvement, observable especially in the early eighties, in the organisation and conditions of imprisonment.³⁷

VI CONCLUSION

Owing to the difficulty in getting across to (former) Polish criminal prisoners of the communist period, the multidimensional role of the narrators – namely, the perspective of an inmate criminal, inmate victim and inmate witness – becomes pretty substantial. In this case, the researcher can reach out for the interweaving resources of auto-biographical, personal, common, or social memory. The stories told by the narrators assume an individual and individualised character, since the events and experiences of violence are entangled in individual and unique biographies. In parallel, however, the prisoners as witnesses to violence become carriers of common and social memory give a (non-institutional, ‘unofficial’) testimony of the functioning of a group of criminal prisoners of the period, thus highlighting a peculiar similarity of experiences and commonness of the violent practices applied. The narrators’ accounts – with their content and the form in which they are expressed – with the contextually observable apathy, no evident stir or agitation – emphasise the problem of discrediting the voice of persons of low social credibility. On the one hand, the (former)

³⁷ Cf. *List z ulicy Smutnej*.

prisoners from a group of marginal and untrustworthy witnesses to the events they describe; on the other, reassured about their low status, they can themselves negate the relevance, importance and essentiality of their own experiences. Such an attitude makes it essentially difficult to obtain genuine testimonies and, thereby, understand, discover, and analyse the significance of the political system's transformation in the dimension of penal and penitentiary policy.

With all its load of cruelty, physical violence was built in an asymmetrical relation (typically, one inmate getting beaten and humiliated by a group of depersonalised officers), according to these accounts. In most of the gathered accounts the image of the tormenter thus assumed a collective form, without a determinable identity, often described as 'representatives of the power apparatus', 'the system', and the like. Only one of these biographies refers to specified individuals and sketches non-generalised personality profiles of the officers. Let us remark, though, that the formula of autobiography elicited for the purpose of the research and written by a penitentiary recidivist over several months is unique. Such authors 'dissect' or 'dispose of' their negative experiences of imprisonment from the late communist period. Their autobiography is filled with numerous reflections; from a time distance, attempts are made at understanding the mechanisms that governed the 'gaol under communism'. It analyses the behaviours of officers and even brings about a symbolic personal confrontation with some of them through evoking their names and pseudonyms. Lastly, it attempts to describe the effects of the physical resistance offered by the inmates – the victims of the system. The account can be concluded thus:

I am seized by ponderings and analysing what occurred. It's strange, but I am disgusted with all this, I should like to erase it from my life, forget about it, but this is not simple. This resides in you, somewhere. ... when a human is humiliated by another human, he becomes an individual who desires to prove that 'I am not someone to be broken down. I am a human with a dignity and honour. And you, you will never have me broken. Just do your job, and I'll remain what I am, always'. [B]

trans. Tristan Korecki

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