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FEMALE MEMORIES OF THE EXPERIENCE OF TOTALITARIAN PLACES OF ISOLATION

Abstract

This article presents and compares the narratives of some female Polish prisoners of Nazi concentration camps, Soviet prison camps, and those imprisoned in post-war communist Poland. It does not focus on the structural and political differences between these total institutions as much as on what was common between the individual experiences of the repressed women and their memories of these repressions. It also considers the *oral history* methodology and its impact on the character of the presented sources. The paper focuses on some elements of the narrative, biographical oral testimonies of women – the attention paid to detail, to being an object of mental and physical harassment (including sexual), and to their strategies of survival, including bonding into surrogate families, as well as their post-imprisonment trauma. It also attempts to put these elements into a national, cultural, and gendered context.

Keywords: gender, memory, experience, Nazi concentration camps, Soviet lagers, Stalinist political prisons

I INTRODUCTION

The very idea of comparing the experiences of the prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps, Soviet prison camps, and Stalinist prisons in Poland after the Second World War may or perhaps should, seem hazardous, however the aim of this paper is not to compare the differences *per se* in these totalitarian places of isolation. The differences in their historical, political and structural contexts are striking and obvious. But what seems to be similar and worth at least making the attempt to juxtapose them are the narratives of the prisoners and the possible similarities in a field that deserves closer scrutiny: the femininity of these narrations and memories.

The narratives presented come from the largest *oral history* collection in Poland, which is the Oral History Archive shared by the History Meeting House in Warsaw and the KARTA Foundation (OHA), which currently holds almost 6,000 recordings.¹ The oldest testimonies collected were recorded in the late 1980s and were thematic interviews, specifically concerning Soviet repressions. Since 2000 the methodology applied within the archive team changed and the interviews are currently conducted according to the narrative biographical methodology, with the elderly, ordinary people in general. Thanks to this, the collection is really unique in its breadth and diversity and constitutes a fascinating, yet challenging *oral history* source for those researching the social history and memory of the twentieth century in Poland.

Oral history is ever more eagerly used by historians to present how the war was remembered, experienced, and understood.² Nevertheless I shall explain here at the outset why I decided to base my research on such sources. The aim of this paper is to document and bring together the most private, intimate areas of social life, and by its nature such research must focus on personal sources. Memoirs concerning the Nazi concentration camps, Soviet prison camps, or political prisons in post-war communist comprise quite well-recognized sources.³ What's more, their narration – both in its tone and its content – is significantly more polished and thought-through. This is why I would like to take into account *oral history* – with all the advantages and disadvantages that come along with its ephemerality – in order to

¹ The catalogue of the Archive is available at the website: www.audiohistoria.pl.

² Gelinada Grinchenko and Natalia Khanenko-Friesen, 'The past differentiated: Revisiting the Second World War and its Aftermath', in *eadem* (eds.), *Reclaiming the Personal: Oral History in Post-Socialist Europe* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 2015), 147–50.

³ Some of the memoirs on the topic, such as for instance Wanda Póltawska, *I boję się snów* (Częstochowa, 1998); or Barbara Skarga, *Po wyzwoleniu. 1944–1956* (Kraków, 2008), have become classics. The combatant circles have long been publishing collections of their memoirs; see for instance, Andrzej Gierczak (ed.), *Serca niezagasałe. Wspomnienia więźniarek z Ravensbrück* (Warszawa, 1979); or Barbara Otwinowska and Teresa Drzał (eds.), *Zawołać po imieniu. Księga Kobiet – Więźniów Politycznych 1944–1958, i* (Pruszków, 2008). Such scattered narrations seem, however, to be aimed rather at describing specific aspects of living in one of the places of isolation, to document history and testify that something had happened in fact, rather than to enable a deeper, biographical perspective concerning the individual survivors.

enrich our perception of the memory and narration of those imprisoned under the Nazi and Stalinist regimes. *Oral history* sources obviously require a selective and critical approach, just like all other sources, which after all are sources created by human individuals. However, in some extraordinary instances they are the only sources available.⁴

II

CULTURAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The inclusion of women into the public sphere during both the Great War and the Second World War was temporary. They were not profoundly emancipated, but rather transformed into temporary substitutes for those men who were occupied with carrying out wartime activities. The phenomenon of the so-called *double helix* meant that the inclusion of women as eligible to become publicly active was superficial and dependent on the national war needs, rather than a deep, ideologically-grounded social change.⁵ In interwar Poland marriage was still perceived as the main goal for women, and any efforts to encourage them to educate themselves and become financially independent were mainly aimed at making them more attractive partners for their husbands.⁶ Even in the most liberal legislative proposals concerning the marriage law regulations, a woman was still understood as an addition to her man and his role, and marriage was understood as a structure socially useful predominantly because of its ability to give birth and raise children⁷. The very discussion of sexuality in Poland at the beginning of the twentieth century was avoided, even during biology lessons, and many women became sexually aware only during

⁴ Christopher R. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York, 2010).

⁵ Margaret R. Higonnet and Patrice L.-R. Higonnet, 'The Double Helix', in Margaret R. Higonnet and Jane Jenson (eds.), *Behind the lines: Gender and the two World Wars* (New Haven, 1987), 31–47.

⁶ Anna Landau-Czajka, 'Przygotowanie do małżeństwa według wybranych poradników z XIX i XX wieku', in Anna Żarnowska and Andrzej Szwarz (eds.) *Kobieta i małżeństwo: społeczno-kulturowe aspekty seksualności: wiek XIX i XX: zbiór studiów* (Warszawa, 2004), 16.

⁷ Claudia Kraft, 'Równość i nierówności w II Rzeczypospolitej. Prawo małżeńskie w dyskursie publicznym na przełomie lat dwudziestych i trzydziestych', in *Kobieta i małżeństwo*, 311–28.

their wedding nights,⁸ not able to earlier educate themselves much on the topic of erotica, because the press discussed it either quite bashfully or from a scientific point of view.⁹

Based on the above, we can deduce and imagine how strong was the image of women as the ones responsible for and suitable to the private sphere, and we should keep in mind that the women presented in this article were also shaped by this context. The topic of sexuality is rarely expressed bluntly in their testimonies, nevertheless the narrator “always refers to [it] by having a specific attitude towards and in relation with gender roles”.¹⁰ According to Joanna Stöcker-Sobelman, the structural sources of the gender differences were: the different positions of men and women in the pre-war social structure; cultural differences and expectations with respect to both genders; and “the differences in living her or his own life by women and men”.¹¹

In general, researchers tend to be cautious while looking for qualities specific to either women’s or men’s narratives, but if they do point out any storytelling tendencies connected with gender they usually agree on the attention paid to detail, the picturesque element of their stories, and the group orientation of female narratives.¹² It is also claimed that the fact that before the war women were raised to be mindful of aesthetics was the reason why they paid so much attention – both in their experiences and their memories of them – to the dirt, the difficulties in hygiene-maintenance, the pain of appearing shameful while disorderly dressed, with their hair shaved or in a mess etc. “The women’s past made it more ‘natural’ for them to associate cleanliness with better self-esteem, with health and survival” – claims

⁸ Jolanta Sikorska-Kulesza, ‘Skąd się wziął twój braciszek? Początki dyskusji o wychowaniu seksualnym dzieci i młodzieży na ziemiach polskich’, in *Kobieta i małżeństwo*, 28–31.

⁹ Katarzyna Sierakowska, ‘Elementy kobiecego dyskursu o seksualności na łamach międzywojennych periodyków dla kobiet’, in *Kobieta i małżeństwo*, 380.

¹⁰ Alicja Kusiak-Brownstein, ‘Płeć kulturowa, „doświadczenie” i wojna – kilka metodologicznych uwag o wykorzystaniu relacji wspomnieniowych’ in Anna Żarnowska and Andrzej Szwarz (eds.), *Kobieta i rewolucja obyczajowa. Społeczno-kulturowe aspekty seksualności. Wiek XIX i XX* (Warszawa, 2006), 412.

¹¹ Joanna Stöcker-Sobelman, *Kobiety Holocaustu. Feministyczna perspektywa w badaniach nad Shoah. Kazus KL Auschwitz-Birkenau* (Warszawa, 2011), 44. Although Stöcker-Sobelman refers to Jewish men and women, these aspects seem to be common to women and men in general.

¹² Piotr Filipkowski, *Historia mówiona i wojna* (Wrocław, 2010), 180–2.

Nechama Tec.¹³ The humiliating aspects of defeminisation supposedly made women more vulnerable and easier to be attacked – both physically and mentally.¹⁴ It seems, however, that being culturally defined as expecting less from life, being passive, responsible for the private sphere, and maintaining the course of life of others could also have made for a greater resilience, in fact making it easier for women to survive.

Indeed, the abovementioned elements can be found in the narratives which are discussed here. This of course does not mean that one never comes across any testimonies of women shaped into individually-oriented, heroic and adventurous life stories, or any picturesque men's testimonies that consisted of detailed portrayals of different members of the group – it means rather that such characterisations are less typical.

It is also important while attempting to interpret the following narratives to keep in mind the context in which these testimonies were created. While *oral history* interviews may be perceived as simply another type of personal memories that could be compiled together with, e.g., memoirs or journals, in my opinion the ones explored here are unique because they combine specific qualities: the time distance between giving an account and the actual time of the events spoken about (which may of course blur the details of the narration, but may as well make it easier to share the most difficult episodes);¹⁵ the unusual spontaneity and rawness of the narration; and last but not least the presence and support of the interviewer, who in various ways also influences the final shape of the narrative.

Not all of the narrators were conscious political actors at the time of their arrest, and not all of them ever became such by engaging in the veterans' community. At the same time, those who constructed their narration while being elderly people were asked to tell their stories presumably because of their specific, heroic experience(s). We should bear in mind that their recollections may become clear-cut life-summaries, consciously created autobiographies, or memoirs for future generations (all of these options can be interesting and

¹³ Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men and the Holocaust* (New Haven and London, 2003), 158.

¹⁴ S. Lillian Kremer, *Women's Holocaust Writing: Memory & Imagination* (Lincoln and London, 2001), 10.

¹⁵ Nikolaus Wachsmann, *Historia nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych* (Warszawa, 2016), 30–1.

valuable). The events from years ago and their perception of them may be mixed with their subsequent personal or political experiences, with the stories shared with other survivors or veterans, and with the contents of books read, movies seen, etc.¹⁶ This layering of memory can be observed especially when comparing the two types of Soviet prisoners' narratives stored in the Oral History Archive of the History Meeting House and the Karta Foundation. The ones recorded in the late 1980s and early 1990s seem to be less martyrological, containing for instance rather straightforward sexual stories, also concerning Polish women, sometimes even the narrator personally.¹⁷ This was probably because of the context of the creation of these testimonies: in most cases the interviewees spoke about their experiences for the first time, determined to finally share their whole stories while probably unaware (and, living in a totally different technological era, perhaps not even able to imagine) the further possible use of them; and secondly they were younger, less burdened with the veteran narration style that was yet to come. On the other hand, the interviews recorded in the first decade of the twenty-first century and later seem more clichéd and contained a more patriotic and national tone, which presumably is the combined effect of the historical policy after the transformation, the biographical work, and the more advanced age of the interviewees.

Furthermore, not all of the interviewees had been arrested because of their actual engagement in conspiracy, but some were detained only out of pure bad luck or coincidence, which makes another interesting aspect which must be taken into consideration when discerning the meaning they do or do not ascribe to their imprisonment stories. Although all of them possibly experienced similar things, such as humiliation, exploitation, dirt, hunger etc., some may interpret it simply as a tragic war experience, and some as a tragic experience that is an element of the wider, tragic history of the whole nation. Indeed, Katherine Jolluck's theory on why women tend to talk less about the misbehaviour of members of their own 'tribe' than men

¹⁶ Such layering of memory even among close relatives is exemplified in, for instance, Susanne Bleiberg-Seperson, 'The Creation of Memory', in Zygmunt Mazur, Jay T. Lees, Arnold Krammer, and Władysław Witalisz (eds.), *The Legacy of Holocaust: Women and the Holocaust* (Kraków, 2007), 73–96.

¹⁷ Maria Buko, Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner and Magda Szymańska (eds.), *Prze-trwałam. Doświadczenia kobiet więzionych w czasach nazizmu i stalinizmu* (Warszawa, 2017), 12.

interestingly combines group and national interests. According to Jolluck, the feminine narratives focus more on the group while male narratives are often more individually-oriented. Thus for women, speaking badly about other Polish women would undermine the image of the whole nation, while for men speaking badly about other Polish men would simply refer to all those worse than the narrator, who at the same time presents himself in a better light¹⁸.

Untangling the narratives and trying to separate what could have been the actual experience of a narrator also involves the issue of what he or she could have read/seen/discussed, i.e. what he or she could have 'post-remembered', and why. This would make up for an interesting analysis of the individual and group policies of remembrance, in line with the cultural approach towards *oral history*.¹⁹ This article, however, is aimed at presenting not primarily *what happened* to the women imprisoned in the totalitarian prisons, but rather what and how they remembered these places, their prison mates, and their own positions (both of body and mind) at the time.

The *oral history* interviews which constitute the basis for the following analysis were conducted according to the narrative biographical interview method developed by Fritz Schütze.²⁰ The interview is co-authored by both the interviewee and the interviewer, however it is the interviewee who is the expert and leader of the narration. In the first part of the interview the interviewee is asked to introduce her/himself and to tell his/her life story. This part is supposed to remain uninterrupted, as this is when the interviewee is able to construct the narration according to her/his vision and to work through his/her biography, and the interviewer is able to reflect on the threads that have appeared, their order, and the reason why they were brought up (e.g. intensity of the memories, importance of threads for the self-presentation, associations, context of the interview, and so on). It is only when the interviewee brings the narration in the first part

¹⁸ Katherine R. Jolluck, *Exile and Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union During World War II* (Pittsburgh, 2002), 133.

¹⁹ Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History*, i, 1 (2004), 66.

²⁰ Fritz Schütze, 'Biography Analysis on the Empirical Base of Autobiographical Narratives: How to Analyse Autobiographical Narrative Interviews', Part I, *European Studies on Inequalities and Social Cohesion*, 1–2 (2007), 153–242; Part II, *ibidem*, 3–4 (2007), 5–77.

of the interview to an end that the interviewer is supposed to ask her/his questions – asked in a chronological order, concerning either the issues already mentioned (asking to develop or explain them) or bringing up new themes. In the third part of the interview the interviewee is once again given the lead in the interview; at this point he or she can add anything else that comes to his/her mind after the question part, as well as finish the narration with an important message or a general reflection on life. Such interviews are of course recorded with the consent of both sides, as well as with the awareness that they will be archived and used by subsequent researchers and be available to the public.

The *oral history* sources offer a unique insight into the most intimate aspects of prison life, therefore they can constitute an interesting contrast, if not contradiction, to the dehumanizing ideology behind the totalitarian prisons. Moreover, a new light is shed on the topic when one looks for the gendered aspects of both the experience and the narrations about them. This is why I attempt in this article to look for the common threads that appeared in the testimonies of those Polish women who were prisoners of the different totalitarian systems of imprisonment/isolation: the Nazi concentration camps, the Soviet prison camps, or the Stalinist prisons in the first decade of post-war Poland. The similarities, which at times are really striking, appear on two levels: the experience, and the memory of it.

III NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMPS

Of course the scale, time periods, and political and structural contexts of the Nazi concentration camps, Soviet prison camps, and Stalinist prisons in post-war Poland were diverse. I am far from implying that these various systems of isolation can be easily compared – especially given the differences in time, scale, and context. My intention is rather to advocate for a panoramic perspective that focuses on what was similar in the individual (feminine) experiences, despite the abovementioned differences. By doing this – while constantly keeping the proportions in mind²¹ – we can try to indicate ‘typical’ or ‘generally’

²¹ To put it in the most succinct way possible, I quote Nikolaus Wachsmann: “It was more probable that the prisoners of NKVD would be set free than that they

feminine aspects of the memory of the twentieth century totalitarian systems of isolation. The testimonies of the Nazi concentration camp prisoners make up the broadest and the most significant part of this work, and I further only point out similarities in the narrations of the women from the other isolation systems. This is in part because the biographical, in-depth interviews with the KZ prisoners²² constitute the majority in number in the OHA collection, but also because I consider this experience (and presumably the memory of it) as the most intense and tragic, being an element of the machinery aimed at total annihilation.

The Polish political prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps quoted in this article were imprisoned during different stages of the Second World War (Anna Burdówna, for instance was arrested on the very first day of war and spent the entire war period in the camp), and they were imprisoned for different periods of time and held different positions in the camp hierarchy. They were guarded by German camp personnel of both sexes, but besides that they had hardly any contact with men. They were imprisoned for different reasons,²³ and were held together with women of other nationalities.²⁴ There were an estimated 40,000 Polish women imprisoned in the KL Ravensbrück²⁵ and around 30,000 Polish women in KL Auschwitz.²⁶

would die, whereas during the war in the SS concentration camps it was exactly the opposite". See Wachsmann, *Historia nazistowskich*, 17.

²² The terms KZ or KL are abbreviations of the German word 'Konzentrationslager', i.e. concentration camps.

²³ Besides the political prisoners, among the persecuted were Jews, Jehovah's witnesses, 'criminals,' 'work-shy,' and 'race defilers'.

²⁴ The greatest number of prisoners of Ravensbrück came from Poland (36 per cent), the Soviet Union (21 per cent), the German Reich (18 per cent, including Austria) and Hungary (8 per cent). The greatest number of prisoners of Auschwitz were Jews (50 per cent), Poles (35 per cent) and Roma (5 per cent).

²⁵ Wanda Kiedrzyńska, *Ravensbrück: kobiety obóz koncentracyjny* (Warszawa, 1965), 75–8; Stanisław Sterkowicz, *Kobiety obóz koncentracyjny Ravensbrück* (Włocławek, 2006), 31; Bernhard Strebel, 'Przepaść nie do przebycia – kompleks obozowy KL Ravensbrück', in *Zeszyty Majdanka*, xxiv (2008), 20.

²⁶ Irena Strzelecka, 'Kobiety w KL Auschwitz', in Waclaw Długoborski and Franciszek Piper (eds.), *Auschwitz 1940–1945. Węzłowe zagadnienia z historii obozu*, ii (Oświęcim–Brzezinka, 1995), 147. However the Polish Jewish women obviously also were Polish citizens, in the statistics they were included in the general category of Jewish prisoners from different countries.

One of the most intense images, recurring in many of the interviews, is the time of entering a concentration camp or prison. The women interviewed recollected a number of similar aspects of entering: shock, surprise, fear, humiliation and intimidation, especially because of the forced nudity in public. Especially traumatizing for them was being naked in front of the male personnel, sometimes in front of the family members, as well as seeing other women (elder, bigger etc.) humiliated. Sometimes women were shaved (both their intimate parts as well their heads), thus deprived of a very significant element of their (female) identity, sexuality, and attractiveness. Hygienic shaving was not only a humiliating experience, but also a risk factor concerning both mental (losing a sense of femininity) and physical health (though it was supposed to prevent pediculosis, at the same time it made it easier to catch an intimate infection).²⁷ All in all, the ritual of entering constituted a really intense first dose of the dehumanizing, intimidating violence of the totalitarian system.

The dehumanization was so successful that those entering a prison often recalled being shocked by the view of the unified prisoners or being terrified by not being able to recognize their loved ones after their heads were shaved and the change of clothes.²⁸ “Each of us who entered first thought that there are men sitting there! Because we only saw the bald heads ... We all wanted to cover our breasts. I was the first, and my sister was after me ... I was already sitting there waiting, then my sister appeared and started to look around for me. She didn’t recognize me. I called to her: ‘Miecia, Miecia!’ And she replied: ‘Oh my God, what a sight!’”²⁹ – recalls Maria Rudzka-Kantorowicz, a prisoner of Auschwitz. “Oh, how ugly a woman looks with no hair!”³⁰ commented another woman prisoner in her testimony. Losing one’s sense of own identity, not being able to recognize other females, finding them ugly if not repulsive – these are some of the most intense impressions encountered upon entering the camps.

The humiliation as a systemic rule, a method of control, is often brought up in the narrations: “I remember one of the most humiliating

²⁷ Stöcker-Sobelman, *Kobiety Holokaustu*, 53.

²⁸ The interview with Antonina Tajak, Oral History Archive of the History Meeting House and the KARTA Centre (OHA), ISFLDP_022. All the citations are translated by the author.

²⁹ Interview with Maria Rudzka-Kantorowicz, OHA, AHM_0655.

³⁰ Interview with Anna Burdówna, OHA, AHM_KWT_0850.

moments, when the *Aufseherin* took a bucket of excrement and poured it all over our heads. It was the first experience of such primitive cruelty on the part of the Nazis... Once they formed us into groups of four and ordered us to strip naked. There was a table, behind which a few young Germans sat. They told us to parade naked in front of these Germans and they checked our teeth. That was the second situation which I remember as a huge humiliation. I was really happy that my mother was not around then, because I can only imagine how the mothers who paraded along with their naked daughters in front of these Germans could have felt,”³¹ recalls Anna Skorupska-Różycka, who was imprisoned in KL Ravensbrück during the Warsaw uprising. “A scary story happened after a month [of being in the camp], when they told us to strip naked. Maybe now it wouldn’t be so appalling and embarrassing ... But to stand naked in front of the Germans, who are sitting in front of the table ... And what were they checking? Our hands – if there isn’t any mange on them. And to check them they needed to humiliate us and make us all naked. That was a form of a terrible maltreatment, not only physical, but the most scariest – moral”³² – recounts another prisoner of Ravensbrück, describing the misuse of power on both the political and gender level. These quotes aptly capture the gendered, cultural difference of experiencing the humiliation in a camp: for women it was the sexual attack on their modesty and purity, while in the male narratives such experiences are recalled also painfully, but rather as a loss of self-rule, dignity, and being stripped of the outer indicators of their social roles.³³

A fascinating, yet disturbing example of opposing the dehumanization process, and one which distinctly captures the idea that women tend to focus more on the details in their narrations, is contained in the reminiscence of Helena Hegier-Rafalska: “We were sure that we were going to be executed. I was calm... We could not wear bras. And without a bra it was really cold, so I found some scraps and wrapped myself in them, and I became warmer. And then I thought: if they take me to the crematory, they will laugh at me. So I quickly took these scraps out, so that they wouldn’t laugh at me after death. I think that this is the

³¹ Interview with Anna Skorupska-Różycka, OHA, AHM_3350.

³² Interview with Bożena Godycka-Karoń, OHA, AHM_1205.

³³ Kremer, *Women’s Holocaust Writing*, 10.

least a person deserves. Death there was deprived of dignity and that was what hurt me the most”³⁴. This moving recollection is not limited to vividly remembering one’s clothing, but also depicts the determination on the part of the prisoners to guard their dignity and identity.

The discipline concerning hygiene and one’s looks often equalled surviving not only morally, but simply in the eyes of the personnel. Genowefa Nóżkowska summed up her survival story as follows: “Not to give yourself up was the most important... So they won’t take you to the gas, so that you still look like a human being”.³⁵ It was often the group who helped (or forced) the weaker ones to stay in shape; Stanisława Bafia recalls dyeing the hair of the elderly ladies and forcing them to walk with energy in front of the guards during the selection in the camp,³⁶ and Krystyna Domańska blushed her friend’s face with a beetroot and held her while marching in front of the camp guards so that her fatal condition remained unnoticed.³⁷

The group perspective in the above-mentioned testimonies can be further distinguished on two different levels. The first would be the so-called ‘surrogate families’, whereby the prisoners grouped themselves into teams of a few and maintained a family-like bond; one that often turned out to last for the rest of their lives. “No one cared about me, maybe besides my camp mom ... I stuck to her and later she took me with her, to her home. I started to love her. I had no mother and I passed all those feelings onto her”³⁸ – recalls Stanisława Bafia, who maintained contact with her camp mother throughout the rest of her life. Another prisoner who was imprisoned with her mother once met her school friend in the camp, she invited her to her family – and for the rest of the time her school friend called her mother as well.³⁹ Within such groups, the prisoners provided themselves not only with food, clothing, or medicines, but also with emotional, intimate support, which was most likely linked to their internalized valuing of family-like bonds. In general, in the female camp recollections it is often stated that it was harder for the men to survive, because they were emotionally weaker, used to being taken care of, and less used to

³⁴ Interview with Helena Hegier-Rafalska, OHA, AHM_KWT_0092.

³⁵ Interview with Genowefa Nóżkowska, OHA, ISFLDP_040.

³⁶ Interview with Stanisława Bafia, OHA, AHM_KWT_0848.

³⁷ Interview with Danuta Krystyna Domańska, OHA, AHM_V_0050.

³⁸ Interview with Stanisława Bafia

³⁹ Interview with Janina Bernacińska, OHA, AHM_KWT_0864.

failing and being submissive.⁴⁰ I would agree however with Nikolaus Wachsmann, who explains the significantly lower death-rate among the female prisoners by pointing rather to the type of work that they were forced to perform in the camps than to their supposedly better bonding and abilities to care for themselves.⁴¹ Nevertheless, these surrogate families provided both hygiene and nourishment support, as well as emotional and moral help and stability. Stöcker-Sobelman claims that the three most important aspects of such small groups were socialization, cooperation, and care. What's more, maintaining such relationships somehow enabled them to maintain the thought that normal life (and its rules) outside the camp still existed, and to maintain one's humanity in general.⁴²

The second perspective would be the national one, based on a quite significant idealisation of the image of Polish women as the ones who were the best at keeping hygiene, organizing themselves, and maintaining education and cultural life. We should bear in mind that antagonisms between different national groups were a general phenomenon in the camps, usually rooted in the pre-war tensions and stereotypes. Nevertheless, it seems that most of the nationalities did not maintain really close, well-organized, and ideologically grounded communities.⁴³ As Kamilla Janowicz-Syczowa quite openly recalls: "Poles had different functions [in the camps], because they knew languages, they were healthy and they looked good ... Poles were the wonderful nationality. In any case this is what I thought about myself and all of my [camp] friends".⁴⁴ Another states that: "It was known that the Poles are clean and intelligent".⁴⁵ Whereas "the French couldn't take the camp. We were toughening ourselves up by washing ourselves every day in cold water. And they were not washing themselves at all, because they were used to luxury, you know. We were tougher. Of course there were conflicts, but not in the Polish blocks, not among us, no".⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 130, 132, 157.

⁴¹ Wachsmann, *Historia nazistowskich*, 525.

⁴² Stöcker-Sobelman, *Kobiety Holokaustu*, 116–19. For a detailed juxtaposition of male and female bonding in the concentration camps concerning specifically the Jewish experience, see Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 175–204.

⁴³ Wachsmann, *Historia nazistowskich*, 557–9.

⁴⁴ Interview with Kamilla Janowicz-Syczowa, OHA, AHM_V_0058.

⁴⁵ Interview with Anna Burdówna.

⁴⁶ Interview with Stanisława Bafia.

Another group aspect of the camp life that often recurs in the recollections is underground education, supposedly at the pre-war level of advancement. Genowefa Olejniczak recalls that: “Poles stuck up together, in solidarity. One helped another however she could. For instance, you could not cry. There were professors, teachers there, and immediately they were telling us: don’t cry, child. You are Polish, don’t cry – don’t let the Germans see it”.⁴⁷ Another prisoner recalls that: “We began to organize ourselves in the blocks, so that we didn’t become utterly stupid. There were professors, different ladies... And they had some speeches, of course secretly, that we needed to start with keeping up tidiness, not letting the lice eat us. That we need to help one another... We set such rules. And it helped a lot. Besides, there were ladies who remembered a lot, they told us stories about movies and books... So whenever we had some free time, we sat somewhere in the corner and told ourselves some stories, so that the time went by somehow”.⁴⁸ However an interesting contradiction to this narration – a quite rare breach in the heroic discourse – is reflected in the following recollection: “If someone tells you about our cultural life, about the conspirational underground [in the camp], he is a liar. It is not true. There was no conspirational underground, no cultural life. How could there be? If one returned hungry, tired, beaten up, maltreated, she had only one wish – to lay down for a bit and take some rest. What cultural life, what conspiracy! When I read about it, hear about it, I don’t believe it. I was in Auschwitz from 1942 to 1944 and I don’t know anything about it, I haven’t seen it”.⁴⁹ It should be noted that the woman quoted never achieved any significant position in the camp hierarchy,⁵⁰ and recalls the whole time of her imprisonment from an utterly victim-like perspective, as an everyday, totally lonely struggle for survival. Her recollections provide a fascinating, valuable expansion of the combatants’ narrative:

⁴⁷ Interview with Genowefa Olejniczak, OHA, AHM_KWT_0849.

⁴⁸ Interview with Helena Hegier-Rafalska.

⁴⁹ Interview with Genowefa Nóżkowska.

⁵⁰ We should bear in mind that it was much easier to survive if a prisoner was a functionary (thanks to which (s)he gained access to better food, easier work conditions and so on). One may come across functionary prisoners’ statements that they used their position to help others as well, but obviously they were not able (or willing) to help everyone in need. For an almost iconic elaboration on the moral *grey zones* in concentration camps, see Primo Levi, *Drowned and the Saved* (New York, 1989).

No one helped me, because everyone had their own problems. Indeed, I knew people who were nice, who consoled me... How could I have known about anything? I was living like in another world. I did not know if it was Sunday, Monday or Friday. I knew I had to wake up in the morning and go to work, and that I would return in the evening tired, hungry and dreaming about laying down. I did not know anything. The question was if I was human? Because I often ask myself this: whether I was human, or a half-animal, half-human maybe? Had I lost everything or had I remained human? Not only me, I mean everyone.⁵¹

The predominantly biased and quite patronizing perspective may or may not have worked as a coping tool during the imprisonment, but it seems to have been useful ever since. By nurturing the memory of Polish women as impeccable heroines, the witnesses interviewed nurture the wider, almost memorial-like narration about Polish national resistance. This process could also be observed in yet another Polish group of war victims. Katherine Jolluck, based on her research concerning Polish women in Soviet exile, has claimed that “[Poles] apply traditional social norms to their relations and functions in their small communities, microcosms of the nation; threatening behaviours or identities are attached to ‘others’, defined on the basis of nationality. Through exclusion and the erection of borders, Polish women delineate the boundaries and configuration of their own community, their own selves. In this process, they essentialise and intertwine these elements of identity, gender and nationality. The women continually link the configuration of gender roles that they regard as proper, civilized, and natural to their own particular national group”.⁵² But even when speaking specifically about the concentration camps, not only did the Poles consider themselves the best organized group within the camp, but Judith Buber Agassi points to them as “the most effective organization of any national group”.⁵³ This image of Polish prisoners in concentration camps as unanimously innocent, heroic, and impeccable, imprisoned because of their active engagement in

⁵¹ Interview with Genowefa Nóżkowska.

⁵² Katherine R. Jolluck, *Exile and Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union During World War II* (Pittsburgh, 2002), xx–xxi.

⁵³ Judith Buber Agassi, “‘Camp Families’ in Ravensbrück and the Social Organisation of Jewish Women Prisoners in a Concentration Camp”, in Esther Herzog (ed.), *Life, Death and Sacrifice. Women and Family in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem, 2008), 108.

anti-Nazi resistance, seems to have won in the discourse about the Second World War in Poland.⁵⁴

During the times of the Polish People's Republic (PRL), it was possible to speak about the Nazi repressions, but for obvious reasons not about the Soviet ones.⁵⁵ This strong nationalist tone, as well as the fact that for a long period of time the more or less academic publications concerning the topic were authored by the former concentration camp prisoners themselves (which of course allowed them to have the deepest insight in the unimaginable, horrifying topic, but at the same time obviously made these works somewhat biased), led to the rather unbalanced perspective in the research. This was further reproduced, for instance when other survivors read these works, and in this way the stereotypes were enhanced. In the Preface to an analysis of the Polish secret scout movement in KL Ravensbrück, prepared by the members of this movement themselves, the Polish women are glowingly referred to as 'bright and intelligent'.⁵⁶ Wanda Kiedrzyńska, for example, explained the fact that while in the recollections of the French prisoners the Polish women were often presented as chauvinist, this was based on French envy of Polish resourcefulness.⁵⁷ Another former prisoner who later documented the history of the concentration camps wrote that almost every Polish prisoner behaved according to the moral standards opposite to those promoted by the system of terror and aggression.⁵⁸

It is worth mentioning, however, that right after the war the discussion concerning the applicable language and perspective towards the

⁵⁴ The iconic publication that fed (or helped create) this narrative is comprised of the memoirs of Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, *Z otchłani. Wspomnienia z lagru* (Częstochowa and Poznań, 1946).

⁵⁵ The fact that the Soviet repressions could have been spoken about only after 1989 and therefore can be perceived as a quite fresh topic of historical discussion has been recurrently used by different political environments in Poland. The most recent – and still ongoing – example would be *żołnierze wyklęci* (cursed soldiers), i.e. the members of the anticommunist underground in post-war Poland, who are used in the current anticommunist (or anti-Russian) narration in Polish politics. Examination of the historical policies based on anti-Russian and anti-German stereotypes in modern Poland would deserve, however, a separate analysis.

⁵⁶ *Mury. Harcerska konspiracyjna drużyna w Ravensbrück*, ed. Andrzej Szefer (Katowice, 1986), 16.

⁵⁷ Kiedrzyńska, *Ravensbrück*, 80.

⁵⁸ Urszula Wińska, *Zwyciężyły wartości. Wspomnienia z Ravensbrück* (Gdańsk, 1985), 32.

concentration camps was heated, even among the former prisoners themselves.⁵⁹ Zofia Wóycicka analyses in her work how, after all, the romantic nineteenth century nationalism mixed with the historical policy of the communist government and the rivalry between ‘Polish memory’ and ‘Jewish memory’, which resulted in the supremacy of this narration in the popular memory in Poland.⁶⁰

Suffering and trauma can often be seen as a lifelong theme in the survivors’ narratives. The women had to get back to a so-called ‘normal life’ and adhere to the roles of mothers, daughters, wives, and workers, while not having any time (or even strength) to work through their trauma. One of them recalls visiting a doctor after the war and, after being prescribed some herbs, he told her: “We all went through something”.⁶¹ Others decided to try and purposefully forget about their experiences and look for some peace and consolation in what the future was about to bring, with a predominant focus on family life. Genowefa Nóżkowska, whose husband also survived the Nazi concentration camps, never talked much with him about their experiences; on the contrary they decided to focus on their family life and supposedly succeeded in creating a warm, loving home for their children.⁶² Helena Hegier-Rafalska also wanted to find peace in the family, but poignantly and dramatically describes her lifelong struggle to manage a loving relationship with her only son: “I loved him very much, and I cared very much for him, but at the same time I couldn’t smile to him at all... I was somehow shut. It was stronger than me. It was like I was made of wood – I stared at him, I could cry all day Now I am kinder to him. Sometimes I would caress him or kiss him (cry). Now, when so many years have passed, and when [all that I have gone through] is more blurred, it is a bit easier for me”.⁶³ Genowefa Olejniczak describes how – being burdened with the camp experience during the first years after the war – she felt in a way ‘stuck in the Ravensbrück camp’. She could not help wondering how the others were able to laugh or dance, as she remained mentally stuck in her tragic past. Only after a few years did she find peace,

⁵⁹ Zofia Wóycicka, *Przerwana żałoba. Polskie spory wokół pamięci nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych i zagłady 1944–1950* (Warszawa, 2009), 37.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*. See for instance: pp. 99, 133, 173, 219, 327.

⁶¹ Interview with Genowefa Olejniczak.

⁶² Interview with Genowefa Nóżkowska.

⁶³ The interview with Helena Hegier-Rafalska.

especially within her marriage, which she describes as being based on a deep connection between her and her husband: “When we were in bed, for instance, it was not like we immediately made love. No, we preferred to tell each other about our past lives, and that is what connected us. It was more important than the other things”.⁶⁴ The impact of the war trauma on the further lives of the prisoners, and subsequently on the lives of their children and grandchildren, is definitely a promising field of research.

IV SOVIET PRISON CAMPS

The Soviet political prisoners quoted were imprisoned within camps during years 1944–56 and they shared space mostly with *blatnye*, i.e. the Russian criminal prisoners. The male prisoners were imprisoned in the nearby *zonas*, therefore contact was easier, which led to both being sexually endangered and having options to gain some advantages in exchange for some kind of relationship. Women made up around 400,000 prisoners in the Soviet prison camps; however the exact percentage of Polish women in this number is hard to estimate.⁶⁵

Recollection of the humiliation and intimidation encountered when entering the camp seems to be universal theme. A Soviet camp prisoner also recalls “terrible moral conditions... From time to time we were taken to a bath. How shocking for us was the first visit! They told us to get naked... We were only allowed to take towels with us... The doors are opening, we enter, and there are male personnel there. We had no idea how to cover ourselves with these towels!”.⁶⁶

Another recurring theme in the testimonies is the phenomena of surrogate families, or maybe simply care for the weaker and a need to be a part of a closer group. One of the Soviet camp prisoners recalls with significant emotion how a friend offered to work along with her for her elderly mother, who was not able to keep up with the heaviness and the tempo of the work. This act of selfless support

⁶⁴ The interview with Genowefa Olejniczak.

⁶⁵ Galina M. Ivanova, *Istorija GULAGa 1918–1958. Social’no-ekonomičeskij i politiko-pravovoi aspekty* (Moskva, 2006), 339–40.

⁶⁶ The interview with Maria Žurek, OHA, AW_I_0169.

and sacrifice made the three women a family-like group for the rest of their lives.⁶⁷ The idea of surrogate families could also be observed among the Polish women in Soviet exile, in contrast to the striking lack of unanimity that permeates the narratives of the Polish male prisoners.⁶⁸ According to Jolluck, “despite the extra burdens such responsibility added, these women gained comfort and satisfaction, both from assisting human beings worse off than they and from exercising the maternal and domestic functions they associated with females and linked with normality”.⁶⁹

In the context of the abovementioned possibility of intersexual relationships, I present a quote from a Soviet camp prisoner. It falls within the testimony recorded in the early 1990’s *memory boom* mentioned in the first part of this article, and is quite daring in its content, especially in not hiding the sexuality (and – or thus? – weakness?) of the narrator. She states that: “It happened, even among the Poles, that the girls let their feelings take over and began relationships with the men, but in comparison to the other nationalities, it happened quite rarely. I would explain it by the fact that among us, the Poles, there were elderly women with high moral standards and they stopped us – the youngsters – from doing these things. They guarded us, took care of us. Even if one of the girls would like to let herself do something, she would be too embarrassed by the presence of the other Poles. She knew she would leave the camp one day. Also our faith stopped us. For sure, it was not easy; it was a constant fight with yourself, but usually you succeeded. It depended on the ethical level and on the temperament. That’s what mattered”.⁷⁰ What is even more interesting in this recollection, though, is the hidden presumption that the Polish prisoners were somehow better than the others – a presumption that has already been recognized in the previous testimonies.

Jolluck interestingly observed that this presumption meant that a cognitive scheme must have been developed to cope with the exceptions to this rule. She listed three possible mechanisms of marginalization of those who did not fit “the definition of Polish women as exceedingly patriotic, civic-minded, chaste, self-sacrificing

⁶⁷ Interview with Danuta Kominiak, OHA, AHM_2650.

⁶⁸ Jolluck, *Exile and Identity*, 132.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, 130.

⁷⁰ Interview with Maria Żurek.

and nurturing”: general silence; claiming that these were only the isolated exceptions; or suggesting that the outcasts fit more into the ‘other’, generally ‘worse’, national groups.⁷¹

V

STALINIST PRISONS

The political prisoners in post-war, Stalinist Poland form the smallest group in terms of numbers. It is estimated that there were between 16,000–25,000 women prisoners, depending on the estimations concerning the total number of political prisoners of that time.⁷² The only other national group in this picture were members of the Ukrainian underground.⁷³

Caring about their good looks is a feature which can be observed also in the narratives of the political prisoners of the Stalinist era. To put it in perspective, we must obviously bear in mind that for these women staying in good shape visually was not a means of actual survival, as it was for example for the concentration camp prisoners during the selections in the camps. Nonetheless, it could be understood as a way of *mental* survival – by opposing the deindividuation and humiliation. Danuta Myrta recalls her meticulous preparations for her trial, with the simple intention of maintaining high spirits: “When I was going to the trial, I lay on my dress so that it would straighten up. With some red pencil I tinted my lips, I dyed my eyelashes with something black, I don’t know what. I curled my hair with some paper,

⁷¹ Jolluck, *Exile and Identity*, 213. When it comes to Polish women in Soviet exile, one cannot forget about the myth of the *Matka Sybiraczka* [Syberian Mother], a strongly gendered and national topos of Polish women as the carriers of Polish national identity and dignity during the times of Russian (tsarist, Soviet etc.) oppression. For more on this topic, see Dorota Bazuń, Izabela Kaźmierczak-Kałużna and Magdalena Pokrzyńska, *Matki Sybiraczki – losy i pamięć. Polskie kobiety zesłane w głąb ZSRR* (Zielona Góra, 2012).

⁷² This number varies from 160,000 to 250,000. See Tadeusz Kostewicz, ‘Więzienie w Fordonie na tle struktur więziennictwa lat 1944–1956’ in *Studia Iuridica*, xxvii (1995), 149; Tomasz Łabuszewski (ed.), *Śladami zbrodni. Przewodnik po miejscach represji komunistycznych lat 1944–1956* (Warszawa, 2012), 7. The only estimation concerning the percentage of women within this group is 10 percent, in Otwinowska and Drzal (eds.), *Zawołać po imieniu*, i, 11, 18.

⁷³ Anna Muller, ‘If the walls could talk. Women political prisoners in Stalinist Poland, 1945–1956’, PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2010.

and everyone was surprised that the prisoners are coming to the court with curled hair and make-up on. Yes, we took care of ourselves, so we wouldn't look slapdash".⁷⁴ This testimony is in general built in its entirety upon details in clothing and looks, so it may be perceived as a textbook feminine narrative. Myrta, even while recalling the very brutal treatment during the interrogations, in a way remembers the situation through her outfit: "I was arrested only in a dark blue coat, with no stockings, no hat, I only had a yellow dress. I was beaten so hard, with something rubber – made with metal bullets in it, I had all of my skin cut and the dress got all stiff and red from blood".⁷⁵ The attention that the female narrators pay to such details can be observed both in their strategies of survival during the imprisonment (such as struggling to keep the most dignified appearance possible) and in their ways of reconstructing their stories (such as recollecting picturesque, precise images).

The group perspective can be again found in the testimonies concerning this system of isolation. Asked about the most significant factors that helped her survive the tough times in prison, one interviewee says bluntly that she did not feel that bad in prison because she had many great friends there, who constantly consoled each other, prayed together, shared the food, – and interestingly – disciplined all the cellmates to take care of their hygiene.⁷⁶ Support from other inmates re-emerges in various recollections as one of the strongest, and probably most effective method of resistance and survival.

Also, the topic of intellectual and moral standards is present in such narratives. A prisoner of the Fordon prison recalls the prison underlife as one with high moral and educational aspects: "We kept on learning. How? ... By writing on the shoe-paste boxes... I taught French, the doctor had her lectures about general practice, the psychologist had hers. Every Sunday was a different topic. It was very nice, we created our own life".⁷⁷ To some, such activities would be a way of staying sane, active, and avoid being bored to death, but to others it may again be proof of the Polish moral resistance.

⁷⁴ Interview with Danuta Myrta, OHA, AHM_KWT_0858.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ Interview with Genowefa Zielińska, OHA, AHM_KWT_0847.

VI CONCLUSION

However tempting it might be to look for a concrete set of features of female memory instead of making general statements that would always admit of some exceptions (like every typology), I would prefer rather to point out some of the most oft-recurring patterns.

The first one is the attention paid to the details, as for instance in the aforementioned Danuta Myrta testimony where she describes being arrested in a yellow dress, where the biographical narration goes along with a narration about the visual, material details of the image of the narrator. Myrta concludes her narration about the imprisonment period as follows: “When I was released, I had red blotches all over my body, but I suntanned a lot and they were gone. These were blotches from freezing, from being cold. When I was released, grandpa gave me some money. I instantly ran to buy myself two pairs of shoes – a pair of brown and a pair of white ones – dresses, costumes... When people are young, they can be careless and spend all their money on clothes...”⁷⁸ Such attentiveness while speaking – and recalling details – can be observed in a significant number of female narrations. In the regard we can again recall the moving reminiscences of Helena Hegier-Rafalska and her fear of being laughed at in her primitive underwear after being murdered.

A second recurring pattern would be the focus on the group, both while being imprisoned and while recalling the period many years later. Female testimonies are not purely linear, presenting the subsequent stages of life of the narrator, but rather like a tree with many branches where the core part is the narrator’s life, but also those of significant others would be given some attention, a shorter presentation of his/her life too. This is one of the small number of proven differences between female and male narratives: women tend to perceive and describe themselves in relation to the group,⁷⁹ whereas men tend to struggle for (and recall) survival on their own, or at most as one of a pair, with no wider, family-like relations.⁸⁰ The most striking phenomena would be the establishment of surrogate families, where

⁷⁸ Interview with Danuta Myrta.

⁷⁹ Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 176.

⁸⁰ Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner (ed.), *Ocaleni z Mauthausen. Relacje polskich więźniów obozów nazistowskich systemu Mauthausen-Gusen* (Warszawa, 2010).

the initiative did not always come from the elder or stronger woman ('the camp mothers'). The pattern was just to look for others to stick to and maintain physical and emotional support with.

The third recurring pattern, which in my opinion is the most promising field for future researchers, is the focus on the intimate, mental experiences and their impact on the subsequent lives of the survivors. Female narrations often provide a deep reflection on what being imprisoned in a dehumanizing, totalitarian institution meant for them in their later lives; how it shaped them as individuals and as members of society. Understanding the history of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century as set of phenomena which still have an ongoing impact on the current times, burdening the descendants of the survivors, offers an interesting perspective on the issues of the collective trauma, second-generation trauma, and its use (or misuse) by historians, educators, or politicians.

proofreading James Hartzell

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