

“Unprocessed” Holocaust

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Nieprzepracowany Holocaust¹

Abstract: Artykuł jest ustosunkowaniem się do stanowiska niektórych specjalistów od tematyki żydowskiej, że każdy pisarz pochodzenia żydowskiego ma obowiązek pisać o Zagładzie niezależnie, czy doświadczył tej potwornej rzeczywistości, czy też – jak w moim przypadku – los go od niej uchronił. Chociaż wiedziałam, że znaczna część mojej rodziny, której nie dane było mi poznać, zginęła podczas Zagłady, pisanie o czymś, czego nie doświadczyłam, uważałabym za pozerstwo/pozę. Szczególnie wobec literatury tworzonej przez autentycznych ocalańców. Pamiętam ostrzeżenie Zofii Nałkowskiej, która nie uznawała fikcji na temat Holocaustu. I przecież znane są wypadki takiej właśnie nieautentycznej literatury z przeszłości. Można zapewne zrozumieć, że ci, którzy doświadczyli Zagłady, mogą posłużyć się doświadczeniami w prozie fikcyjnej. Nie tak dawno natknęłam się na dwa teksty, w których zostałam oskarżona o „nieprzepracowanie” Holocaustu w moich wierszach. Takie podejście jest dla mnie niczym innym niż odwrotną stroną rasizmu. Niektórzy specjaliści od tematów żydowskich żywią przekonanie, że Żydzi powinni pisać tylko o Żydach, Zagładzie i znowu... o Żydach. Dla mnie osobiście jedną z ważniejszych lekcji o Holokauście była twórczość Henryka Grynberga, który przeżył tę traumę. Lektura ta stała się dla mnie lekcją empatii, wiele jego utworów analizowałam, recenzowałam, ale nigdy nie pretendowałabym, że coś podobnego przeżyłam. A skoro nie przeżyłam, nie mogłabym tego „przepracowywać”. Moją autentyczną traumą było wygnanie. I dopiero ta faza mojego życia spowodowała „przepracowanie” w pewnym sensie „nieprzepracowanej” rzeczywistości. Dopiero wtedy zrozumiałam, że całe powojenne życie moich rodziców było swoistym wygnaniem, rozumiałam ich poczucie utraty i tęsknotę za Lwowem. W 1991 roku, zwiedzając Salę Dziecięcą w Muzeum Holocaustu w Jerozolimie i słysząc powtarzane imiona milionów dzieci zamordowanych podczas wojny, byłam w stanie przeżyć autentyczną żalobę po moich nieznanym mi kuzynach. I to zdołałam przepracować.

Słowa kluczowe: Holocaust, przepracowanie, trauma, wygnanie, ocalańcy, poczucie utraty

Key word: Holocaust, unprocessed, trauma, exile, survivors, sense of loss

¹ Tekst został wygłoszony na konferencji „International Holocaust Studies Conference” w Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN w październiku 2015 roku (organizatorzy: Nancy Rupprecht, Conference Chair, Elyce Rea Helford, Ph.D., Conference Program Chair, Dr. Emily B. Baran, Assistant Profesor Department of History Middle Tennessee State University).

My first reaction to the invitation to this significant event was to decline. Even though I am a Polish Jew, and I belong to the generation born during World War II, and a great part of my family, unknown to me, was brutally murdered during the war, I did not experience the Holocaust as such. And I would consider myself an impostor writing about the Holocaust, not having lived through that experience, and in the presence of books written by authentic survivors.

And, as we remember, there were such deceptions in the past. In addition I recall the rule introduced by the Polish writer, Zofia Nałkowska: no fiction in writing about the Holocaust. I understand, however, that some survivors may use their experiences as a base for fiction.

Let me be specific, I was born a world apart from the birthplace of my parents, I never had seen any of my relatives killed by the Germans or others during the Holocaust. When we were allowed to return to Poland after the war it was to former German territory, Szczecin. My parents who lost everyone they had left behind were not allowed to see the places of the massacre. More that two decades later they had the opportunity to visit for few days their hometown: Lwów–Lviv–Lvov. By searching and pursuing, my mother was able to find out how some of her relatives died, but my father never found a trace. The facts established by my mother, and the stories of her surviving relatives, I was able to publish several years ago in the Polish-language magazine *Midrasz* in the form of my mother's interview and an authentic letter.

Some time ago I decided to read about all the atrocities that took place in my parents' native Lwów in the years 1941–1945. I took all the relevant books from the library, and in one of them I found the scene in which a boy asks his assailant to let him go home because his mother does not know where he is. It is similar to what I knew happened to a child in our family. I returned all the books to the library without reading any further. In that respect I am guilty of not processing.

My generation of Jewish children lived innocent, secular, and happy lives near the ruins, not realizing that this was not a natural landscape. When I was a child, I did not know a single Jewish peer who had grandparents. However, this seemed somewhat natural, since many of our Polish friends in the town we lived had also lost relatives during the war, in the army, during the Warsaw Uprising, during the deportations to Germany or Russia. And all had been born somewhere else.

I was aware that I had lost cousins, and each of my parents had lost the one living parent and siblings. But I came into the world of non-existent grandparents and nucleus families.

I longed so much to have the opportunity to call someone “grandma” that my sister and I decided to call our German cleaning lady “grandma.” And she, being separated from her family, assumed that title.

Recently I came upon two texts in which I was blamed for not having “processed” the Holocaust in my poems, for not writing more explicitly about it. To tell the truth, I look at such attitudes as a form of reverse racism. Some specialists in Jewish studies begin to believe that Jews should only write about

Jews, the Holocaust and again – Jews. I know that I am very much aware of my identity, and I appreciated when one reviewer of my fifth book of poems, which had first been published back in Poland after our exile, pointed out three motifs of reflection in my poetry – viewing/watching the world, Jewish fate, and the bond, or absence of such, with the Other. He pointed out that I had been able to escape the facile evocation of the drama of the Jews.² Some non-ideological critics also find references in my poems to the Holocaust that they appreciate. The prominent Polish scholar, Wojciech Tomasiak, dedicated a small chapter in his book to the analysis of my poem “Locomotive,” in which there is a one-line reference to the Holocaust.³

I believe that I am not the only writer with so-called hyphenated identity who is pushed to the corner by specialists. I read some bitter testimonies of Jewish-American writers who also did not appreciate such attitudes on the part of their critics.

I grew up with a full understanding, please do not equate it with appreciation, of my origins, and at a certain point of my life I learned more and more about the plight of the Jews during the War, which some of my early poems reflect in their feelings of loneliness, and exclusion.

In my childhood and early youth I kept hearing the Yiddish song during the yearly commemorations of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, based on M. Gebirtig’s poem about the prewar pogrom in the town of Przytyk. “S’brent” meant “It is burning.” Once I asked someone to translate for me the Yiddish poem and I wrote a poem ending with the words “My town is burning, and at the Warsaw Ghetto Monument, the torch is burning.” It was a sarcastic poem, and I showed it to two people, one of whom was a poet who when I was young was something of a mentor, and he approved; the other was the editor-in-chief of the major Szczecin newspaper, a friend of my mother whom I had known since childhood. He accepted several of my other poems, and about this particular he asked: “And what would you like to be burning?”

I don’t think that poem was ever published.

Recently in my papers I found another poem, perhaps also never published, based on the same image from Gibertig’s song but related in this instance to our emigration. In my personal life it was our emigration following the so-called 1968 anti-Zionist campaign of the Polish Communist regime, which was a major trauma that I am still processing, however on a different level than at the beginning.

The poem reads:

Emigration

*It’s burning, brothers, it’s burning, our little town in flames.
Mordechai Gebirtig*

² M. Broński, (actually: Skalmowski), *Płynność świata*, „Kultura”, March 1994, s. 151–153.

³ „Ikona nowoczesności”.

For my parents

Suddenly
my little town was burning
S'brent
S'brent
everybody called out all around
hissing flames
S'brent
they repeated in their houses at night
but they didn't toss their pillows out the window
and in the morning it was very hard
to wipe the bitter ash from the heart

— we must leave —

whispered Tevya the Milkman

— to America
screeched the cantor's son
and others silently moved behind tchem.
Tr. Ross Ufberg

Emigracja

*Gore bracia, gore, płonie nasze miasteczko
Mordechaj Gebirtig*

Moim Rodzicom

Nagle
spaliło się moje miasteczko
S'brent
S'brent
wołali wszyscy dookoła
choć nie było
syczących płomieni
S'brent
powtarzali nocą w swoich domach
lecz nie rzucali przez okno poduszek
a tylko rankiem bardzo trudno było
otrząść serce z gorzkiego popiołu

— trzeba już jechać —

szepnął Tejwie Mleczarz

do Ameryki
pisnął syn Kantora
a inni milcząc ruszyli za nimi.

(niedatowane) (undated)

I am quoting this here to show how persistent this motif was for me. And yet, I knew nothing of what happened to my relatives in Lwów. I learned that only later. Recently, in the *Slavic Review* I came across the review of a new book by Piotr Forecki “Reconstructing Memory: The Holocaust in Polish Public Debates.” I did not read the book but the reviewer, Jonathan Huener of the University of Vermont, points to “the phenomenon of ‘collective forgetting’ in the years of the Polish People’s Republic”⁴ Forecki dedicated four chapters to naming a variety of factors, one of which is marked by “an emphasis on Polish wartime victimization and martyrdom.” And that was the atmosphere my generation grew up in. Jews were considered, in the official propaganda version, collateral damage of the war. And I would say not only my generation in Poland but everywhere else. The discourse on the Holocaust was absent in the United States, and in Israel as well. As was the totally absent topic of the Katyń massacre. I mention it here only because in the last few years I learned that my paternal grandmother’s relative, who was a chief Rabbi of the prewar Polish Army, was murdered in Katyń.

When I look back at it I suspect that this early indifference to the topic of the Holocaust may have been a cause of the many suicides among Holocaust survivors. It was only in the 1970s and 80s that the topic fully opened up for discussion, in large part because of the Lanzmann’s *Shoah*.

The important lesson for me was the books of my friend Henryk Grynberg, the Holocaust survivor and major writer. I was able to empathize, to analyze his work, to write reviews, but I would never claim that I had experienced it. I could not process something I had not experienced.

My major trauma was our exile. And it is interesting that this phase of my life resulted also in some sort of “processing” the “unprocessed” realities. Only when I found myself in exile did I realize that my parents’ postwar life was already an exilic experience, only then was I able to comprehend their lifelong feeling of displacement, and their nostalgia for Lwów. And this is the subject of many of my poems, such as “The Lost Land” and “Birds,” “Forget-Me-Not.”

In 1991, standing in the dark Children’s Room in the Museum in Jerusalem and hearing repeated the names of children who had been killed I was able to experience the authentic mourning process. Later on, I cannot remember when, I wrote a poem about my cousin who perished in Kraków.

Cousin

I didn’t know him
he had blonde hair
and made sketches
only through the small window
light fading all the time

⁴ „Slavic Review”, Spring 2015, s. 172–173.

it might have possible
to sneak across the border
from Krakow to Lviv
but grandma was blind
so better together
with the sketches
the blond locks
and grandma.

Tr. Ross Ufberg

Kuzyn

Nie znalazłam go
miał jasne włosy
i rysował
tylko przez małe okienko
coraz mniej światła.

Jeszcze można było
przez zieloną granicę
z Krakowa do Lwowa
ale babcia ślepa
więc lepiej już razem
z rysunkami
jasnymi lokami
i z babcią.

(data nieznana) (undated)

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