



## Untraditional Images of Auschwitz in Literature

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I.

After the Second World War the predominant idea was that most of the guards in concentration camps were sadists or fanatical anti-semites who took pleasure in torture and brutality. For example, former Auschwitz inmate Erich Kulka perceived and described them as such at the famous Frankfurt trial in the mid 1960s (Kulka 1964 and 1966). Many of the accused commanders and doctors at the Auschwitz camp struck Kulka as monsters and killers who were denying their crimes and trying to escape punishment. But there is much to indicate that Kulka was situating the behavior of the accused within predefined profiles of Nazi criminals, profiles that were conventional at that time. Most of them, as psychiatric tests confirmed, did not adhere to the “fiend,” “sadist,” or “primitive” type. It would appear that their deformation had more to do with ideological indoctrination, in that they were infected by grand words (e.g. Himmler’s) on the fateful struggle of all Germans, the superhuman task that stood before them, and their hard duty and obligations resembling heroic struggles on the front, and the like.<sup>2</sup>

The well-known book by Primo Levi, *La tregua* (1963, *The Reawakening*), portrays the liberation of the Auschwitz camp in January 1945 and the author’s return home to Italy. In the first chapter he writes about the dirt that clung to the memories and the consciences of the Auschwitz inmates. The degradation and loss of human dignity would remain with them forever. Many also developed a feeling of guilt or joint guilt. Moreover, this great humiliation

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<sup>2</sup> At a meeting of SS commanders in Poznań in October 1943, Himmler said: “I am referring to the evacuation of the Jews, the annihilation of the Jewish people [...] Most of you know what it means to see a hundred corpses lie side by side, or five hundred, or a thousand. To have stuck this out and—excepting cases of human weakness—to have kept our integrity, that is what has made us hard. In our history, this is an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory. [...] We have carried out this heaviest of our tasks in a spirit of love for our people.” (Van Pelt and Dwork 1996, p. 337)



and the Shoah as a whole is something that can never be removed or cured. Modifying the well-known words of Jan Patočka, we could describe it as the trauma of the shocked, or in a narrower sense as the trauma of those who survived the death camps and who carry the difficulty of coming to terms with life “afterwards” (in this context, psychologists speak of the “survivor syndrome,” cf. Niederland 1980), and in a broader sense as a trauma caused by the shock of the systematic, fundamental denial of traditional humanitarian principles of European civilization. In literary form this trauma was portrayed, for example, by Peter Weiss, the German dramatist and novelist who was born a Czechoslovak citizen and from 1939 lived in Sweden. His play *Ermittlung* (1965, *The Investigation*) paraphrases with quite considerable documentary acumen the depositions at the trial of the Auschwitz guards in Frankfurt am Main from 1963 to 1965. The author refers to eighteen of the accused by name, while he refers anonymously to nine witnesses, one prosecutor, and one defense lawyer; the minutes of the court proceedings are condensed into rhythmic replies. Unlike Erich Kulka, *Ermittlung* does not present the accused SS men and witnesses (former prisoners) in black and white terms. In the following passages, as in the case of Primo Levi, the prisoners (including one who worked at Auschwitz as a doctor) show feelings of shared guilt and permanent shock from the camp (cf. Roth 2003).

Defense Lawyer:

Mr. witness

You had sworn as a doctor

How was your behavior in view of this oath

Prosecutor:

We object to the question

that tries to equate the character of the witness

with that of the accused



The defendants are accused of killing  
of their own free will  
whereas the witness was simply forced  
to be present at the murder

Witness 3:

I would testify to the following:

These inmates  
had attained a special standing in the camp  
and had therefore managed to postpone  
their own execution  
They had gotten closer  
to the rulers in the camp  
They wanted to keep some chance  
for surviving  
and so they were forced to appear to collaborate

[...]

And we inmates  
from the most prominent  
down to the dying man  
all belonged to the System  
The difference between us  
and the guards in the camp  
was less than the difference  
between us and the free men outside

[...]



Witness 7:

I got out of the camp

but the camp still exists inside of me.<sup>3</sup>

In *La tregua*, Levi's autobiographical narrator describes his dispute with a Greek Jew, former fellow inmate Mordo Nahum, who replies to Levi's argument that the war had ended with the words: "The war is still on." While the narrator remains under the illusion that the experience at Auschwitz was entirely exceptional, Nahum's world is one of "iron principles."

The Lager had happened to both of us; I had felt it as a monstrous upheaval, a loathsome anomaly in my history and in the history of the world; he, as a sad

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<sup>3</sup> „Verteidiger:

Herr Zeuge

Wie verhielten Sie sich dem Eid gegenüber  
den Sie als Arzt geschworen hatten

Ankläger:

Wir protestieren gegen diese Frage  
mit der die Verteidigung den Zeugen  
mit den Angeklagten gleichzustellen versucht  
Die Angeklagten töteten aus freiem Willen  
Der Zeuge mußte notgedrungen  
der Tötung beiwohnen

Zeuge 3:

Ich möchte folgendes antworten  
Diejenigen unter den Häftlingen  
die durch ihre Sonderstellung  
einen Aufschub des eigenen Todes  
erreicht hatten  
waren den Beherrschern des Lagers  
schon einen Schritt entgegengegangen  
Um sich die Möglichkeit des Überlebens  
zu erhalten  
waren sie gezwungen  
einen Anschein von Zusammenarbeit zu wecken

[...]

Auch wir Häftlinge  
vom Prominenten  
bis hinab zum Sterbenden  
gehörten dem System an  
Der Unterschied zwischen uns  
und dem Lagerpersonal war geringer  
als unsere Verschiedenheit von denen  
die draußen waren

[...]

Zeuge 7:

Ich kam aus dem Lager heraus  
aber das Lager besteht weiter"

(Weiss, 1966, pp.106-110. English translation by J.H.)



confirmation of things well known. “There is always war,” man is wolf to man: an old story. He never spoke to me of his two years of Auschwitz.” (Levi 1995, p. 52)<sup>4</sup>

Hence Nahum believes that Auschwitz was just a clearer representation of the entire modern-day world.<sup>5</sup>

Levi’s *La tregua* describes the hero’s bizarre and sorrowful wanderings home to Turin after the liberation of the camp—a variation of the theme of Homer’s *Odyssey*. It is as if a cruel and malicious god was playing with the inmates who suffered from mortal exhaustion after surviving Auschwitz. They find themselves as far away as northern Belarus and then in Romania, together with captured Fascist Italian soldiers, dogged by hunger and suffering senselessly. They come to the realization that the end of the war and the defeat of Nazi Germany do not signify any radical turning point for themselves and the world at large, for they had anticipated a new life and the general establishment of justice.

The news plunged us into a riddle of doubts and anxiety. We had hoped for a short and safe journey, towards a camp equipped to receive us, towards an acceptable substitute for our homes; and this hope formed part of a far greater hope, that of an upright and just world, miraculously re-established on its natural foundations after an eternity of upheavals, of errors and massacres, after our long patient wait. It was a naïve hope, like all those that rest on too sharp a division between good and evil, between past and future, but it was on this that we were living. The first crack, and the other inevitable ones, small and large, that followed it, were for us a cause of grief, the more hardly felt because they were unforeseen; for one does not

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<sup>4</sup> “Era venuto il Lager per entrambi: io lo avevo percepito come un mostruoso stravolgimento, una anomalia laida della mia storia e della storia del mondo; lui, come una triste conferma di cose notorie. ‘Guerra è sempre, l’uomo è lupo all’uomo: vecchia storia. Dei suoi due anni di Auschwitz non mi parlò mai’” (Levi 1963, p. 58).

<sup>5</sup> Polemics between both standpoints—i.e. the conception of the Holocaust as an anomalous exception, and the opposing notion of the Holocaust as an extreme extrapolation of some trends of modern civilization—were later summarized by Zygmunt Bauman (1989).



dream for years, for decades, of a better world, without representing it as perfect.”

(Levi 1995, p. 39-40)<sup>6</sup>

This is reminiscent of what was seen by witnesses of the trials of Nazis in Nuremberg, Jerusalem, Frankfurt, and elsewhere. Just like the other Auschwitz inmate Erich Kulka in Frankfurt, Levi sees a fissure here in the moral order of the world, though he draws more profound conclusions from it: he is not satisfied with just condemning the wickedness of his captors.

Clearly, Levi perceives the experience of the Shoah and the Nazi camps in a different way than that of other novelists writing about Auschwitz. The usual treatment of this subject begins with the arrest or the arrival at the camp and continues with a description of the brutal behavior of the Nazis and the suffering and death of fellow inmates, ending with rescue, the liberation of the camp, or escape from the death transports, and the hope for a new life. Examples can be found in three well-known books by Polish authors who wrote autobiographical works on Auschwitz-related subjects immediately after the war: *Dymy nad Birkenau* by Sewerena Szmaglewska (1945, *Smoke over Birkenau*), which was included by the Nuremberg tribunal in its case files; *Z otchłani* (1946, *From the Abyss*) by the Catholic writer Zofia Kossak; and *Przeżyłam Oświęcim* (1946, *I Survived Auschwitz*) by Krystyna Żywulska. These and similar works, referred to in Polish literature as “martyrological,” are naturally varied. However, they are written from a similar standpoint: the suffering and victims that are described and the hecatombs of the dead are not all in vain. This is a struggle against evil, which must ultimately be defeated. The prototype for these works can be found

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<sup>6</sup> “La notizia ci precipitò in un intrico di dubbi e di angosce. Avemamo sperato in un viaggio breve e sicuro, verso un campo attrezzato per accoglierci, verso un surrogato accettabile delle nostre case; e questa speranza faceva parte di una ben più grande speranza, quella in un mondo diritto e giusto, miracolosamente ristabilito sulle sue naturali fondamenta dopo una eternità di stravolgimenti, di errori e di stragi, dopo il tempo della nostra lunga pazienza. Era una speranza ingenua, come tutte quelle che riposano su tagli troppo netti fra il male e il bene, fra il passato e il futuro: ma noi ne vivevamo. Quella prima incrinatura, e le molte altre inevitabili, piccole e grandi, che seguirono, furono per molti di noi occasione di dolore, tanto più sensibile quanto meno previsto: poiché non si sogna per anni, per decenni, un mondo migliore, senza raffigurarlo perfetto” (Levi 1963, p. 41).



in values that are deeply encoded within European culture: Jesus's sacrifice, the apocalypse, and the Judeo-Christian idea of history as a process that has its plan and its ultimate meaning in salvation, the eschaton. This perception is also matched by the aforementioned scheme of things. There is a clear boundary between the world outside the camp and the world within the camp ("it was there in that life, which does not count" writes Żywulska [1957, p. 105]); in the camp itself there is also a clear difference between the world of "the just" and the world of "the devils." Moreover, the connotation of hell (or purgatory) is often used. All the awful events, the mass murders, humiliations, and human degradation basically do not impair faith in ideals but, if anything, strengthen it.

## II.

In this context of martyrological literature, which is naturally also bolstered by the strong tradition of Polish romantic messianism and heroism, the prose works of another Pole, Tadeusz Borowski, stand out in sharp contrast. During the war he was a member of an illegal group of poets and attended secret university courses in Warsaw. He was arrested and arrived at Auschwitz in April 1943 when he was twenty. As a Pole he had a higher status in the camp than the Jews, and he became a "Pfleger" (nurse). In August 1944 he was transported to a camp in Dautmergen in Swabia and later to Dachau, where he lived to see liberation. Borowski's stories about Auschwitz, which were published in several collections from 1946 to 1948, also have a clearly autobiographical basis. In contrast to the aforementioned works by Szmaglewska, Kossak, and Żywulska, however, they provoked quite a strong backlash from critics and readers (cf. Drewnowski 1962). The author was accused of cynicism, not only because of the picture he painted of the concentration camp, which was diametrically opposed to the martyrological literature (see below), but also because his first-person narrator is named Tadek (Tadeusz), and an autobiographical anti-hero of this kind was hard for readers to take just after the war. However, comparison with various documentary materials over time



has shown that Borowski's depiction of Auschwitz is close to what the majority of camp inmates actually experienced.

In his introduction Borowski, as the author of *Kamienny świat* (1948, *World of Stone*), explicitly distanced himself from the events described in these stories: "I am not a positive catastrophist, I did not know Capo Kwaśniak, I did not eat human brains, I did not murder children, I did not sit in the bunker, I did not go out to the opera with the Germans, I did not drink wine in a garden restaurant, I did not indulge in infantile dreams—I would be very sorry if the stories from *World of Stone* were to be considered pages from the author's confidential diary just because they were written in the first person."<sup>7</sup> However, most readers found the strength of the narrative in his fictional works so attractive that they were unable to accept this explicit negation of (Philippe Lejeune's) "le pacte autobiographique," which anticipates that a first-person narrator will expend maximum effort to ensure that the events depicted are authentic.<sup>8</sup>

One conspicuous feature of Borowski's prose is its antipathetic objectivity and realistic harshness. If we seek at least an approximate analogy in the depiction of the First World War, we will find it in Jaroslav Hašek's *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války* (*Good Soldier Švejk and his Fortunes in the World War*) and Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (*Journey to the End of the Night*), which share with Borowski a plebeian pragmatism and ridicule of all kinds of ideals and higher culture.

Man is destined and chosen to know truth, that he may with his spirit rule the whole universe in harmony, that he may continually develop and educate himself

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<sup>7</sup> "Nie jestem pozytywnym katastrofistą, nie znałem kapy Kwaśniaka, nie jadłem mózgów ludzkich, nie mordowałem dzieci, nie siedziałem w bunkrze, nie chadzałem z Niemcami do opery, nie piłem wina w ogrodzie, nie oddaję się infantylnym marzeniom – w ogóle byłoby mi bardzo przykro, gdyby opowiadania z Kamiennego świata zostały potraktowane jako kartki z intymnego pamiętnika autora tylko dlatego, że są pisane w pierwszej osobie" (Borowski 1977, p. 135).

<sup>8</sup> Though it emerged from the testimony of fellow inmates that Borowski behaved compassionately at the camps, i.e. his conduct was different from that described by the autobiographical narrator. Cf. Wójcik (1972, p. 13).



and gradually rise to higher and higher spheres and more intelligent and affectionate worlds. (Hašek 1973, p. 653)<sup>9</sup>

These words in Hašek's novel (exclaimed from the trench by the drunken cook Juranda) ridicule the humanistic pathos of progress. In a Polish version by Borowski, they might come from the mouths of Polish clerics or officers.

All through the war he [an archbishop who comes to celebrate the anniversary of the Battle of Grunwald, J. H.] had been somewhere in the world above where there is heroism and the Motherland and a bit of God. Whereas we had been elsewhere, where there were turnips and bugs and phlegmons. He is surely full and I would like to eat. He looks at today's celebration from the viewpoint of Poland, while I look at it from the viewpoint of goulash and tomorrow's lenten soup.<sup>10</sup>

From our viewpoint, Borowski's prose work can be seen as a conflict between two conceptions of reality and history. The borderline does not lie between the criminal Germans and the noble Jews (or Poles), between the Nazi captors and their victims, and even less so between the hell of Auschwitz and the happy life to follow. Here the SS men and Nazis are not remarkable for any particular perversity. Sometimes they are portrayed neutrally (e.g. in the short story "Pożegnanie z Maria" ["Farewell to Maria"]), elsewhere the conduct of the Germans is no different than that of the camp "big shots." For example, in the short story "Dzień na Harmenzach" ("A Day at Harmenz") one of the young inmates is a homosexual prostitute, quietly eating cooked meat and onions in front of his close to death starving fellow inmates. The categories of good and evil in Borowski's prose works do not coincide with any

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<sup>9</sup> "Člověk je určenej a povolanej k tomu, aby poznal pravdu, aby von vládl duchem v nějaké harmonii věčného všehomíra, aby se stále vyvínoval a zdělával, postupně vcházal do vyšších sfér, inteligentnějších a láskyplnějších světů" (Hašek 1980, pp. 246-247).

<sup>10</sup> "On całą wojnę był gdzieś tam w wielkim świecie [...] bohaterstwo i Ojczyzna, i trochę Boga. A myśmy mieszkali gdzie indziej, co to brukiew, pluskwy i flegmony. On na pewno jest syty, mnie się chce jeść. On na dzisiejszą uroczystość patrzy pod kątem Polski – ja gulaszu i jutrzejszej postnej zupy" (Borowski 1954, p. 177).



particular groups. Hence the roles are easily reversed as soon as the war is over and the former inmates become sadistic seekers of vengeance (see the short story “Milczenie” [“Silence”]). They are so far filled with hatred that they do not spare the innocent (“Spotkanie z dzieckiem” [“Meeting with a Child”]).

Basic differences do exist in Borowski’s fictional world between the false pathos of idealism on the one hand and an objectively sober attitude to life on the other. The narrator himself underwent this transformation from idealism to sober pragmatism. In occupied Warsaw, while still free, he wrote exalted poetry, “I wrote out profound and apposite aphorisms that I had found in books, and learnt them off by heart.”<sup>11</sup> However, he is confronted by a brutal reality: his lover Marie is arrested in a raid. “As I found out later, they took Marie as an Aryan-Jewish Mischling on a Jewish transport to a well-known camp by the sea, gassed her in a crematorium chamber and evidently made soap out of her body.”<sup>12</sup> When Tadek himself arrives at Auschwitz he accepts the “stone world” of the camp, because otherwise he would not survive. The story “Dzień na Harmenzach” describes a typical day at the camp, just like Solzhenitsyn’s *Один день Ивана Денисовича* (*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*). The idyllic description right at the beginning is unexpected:

The shadow of the chestnut trees is green and soft. It gently undulates along the ground, which is still quite moist, because it has been freshly dug over, and it hovers over the crown of an emerald canopy, fragrant with morning dew. The trees form a tall guard of honor along the pathway, their crowns merging into the blueness of the sky. A heavy smell of mud drifts in from the ponds. The velvet grass is still silver with dew, but the earth is now steaming in the sunshine.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> “[...] zapisywałem na luźnych karteczkach głębokie sentencje i trafne aforyzmy, które znalazłem w książkach, i uczyłem się ich na pamięć” (Borowski 1977, p. 28).

<sup>12</sup> “Jak się później dowiedziałem, Marię, jako aryjsko-semickiego mischlinga, wywieziono wraz z transportem żydowskim do osławionego obozu nad morzem, zagazowano w komorze krematoryjnej, a ciało jej zapewne przerobiono na mydło” (ibid., p. 35).

<sup>13</sup> “Cięń kasztanów jest zielony i miękki. Kołysz się lekko po ziemi jeszcze wilgotnej, bo świeżo skopanej, i



This idyllic mood is matched by the narrator's peace of mind: "Work goes well if you have eaten a piece of smoked brisket with bread and garlic in the morning and drunk it down with a tin of condensed milk."<sup>14</sup> In these passages we feel ourselves to be in a different Auschwitz than the one described by Szmaglewska, Kossak, and others. Tadek is a foreman (Vorarbeiter), i.e. the lowest "big shot" in the camp hierarchy. He has enough food and therefore has only memories of the days of terrible hunger. On the other hand, he is under the complete control of not only the SS men (when he refuses to give his watch to one of them, it gets smashed against a wall), but also the capos (the inmates' overseers, mostly German criminals). Despite his position he finds his life is in danger when a guard hears him passing on news to the others about the fall of Kiev. In order to survive he has to observe the inhuman laws of the camp. He steals some food from another group, he laughs at an inexperienced inmate who is beaten by an SS man, and he impassively passes on a message to another boss to liquidate Jewish prisoners who are unable to walk. But he also gives his bowl of soup to starving fellow inmates. He feels sympathy for the old Greek Jew, Beker, who did not pass the selection after work and is sent to the gas. Tadek's conversation with Beker is important, taking place just before the selection that sends him to the gas chamber. Beker was previously Lagerältester (head of the inmates' self-governing body) at the Jewish camp in Poznań, where he is said to have had fellow prisoners executed, including his own son.

"You swine," I exploded.

[...]

"How long have you been at this camp?"

"Hm... some months or so."

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wznosi się nad głowa seledynową kopułą pachnącą poranną rosą. Drzewa tworzą wzdłuż drogi wysoki szpaler, a czuby ich rozplywają się w kolorycie nieba. Odurzająca woń bagna ciągnie od stawów. Trawa zielona jak plusz srebrzy się jeszcze rosą, ale ziemia już paruje w słońcu" (ibid., p. 36).

<sup>14</sup> "Dobrze jest pracować, jak się zjadło na śniadanie ćwierć boczkę z chlebem i czosnkiem i zapiło się puszką skondensowanego mleka" (ibid., p. 42).



“You know, Tadek, I like you a lot,” he said unexpectedly, “but you have never really known what it means to be hungry, have you?”

“Depends what you mean by hunger.”

“Hunger is really when you look at another person as something to eat. I have been that hungry, you follow me? [...] hey, where we were, people wanted to eat each other alive! So should I not have killed the cooks who bought vodka for butter and cigarettes for bread? My son stole, so I killed him too. [...]”

I observed him with curiosity, as if for the first time.

“And what about you? Did you only eat your own portion?”

“That's different. I was the Lagerälteste.”<sup>15</sup>

The narrator's argument with idealism and heroism is particularly evident in “U nas w Auschwitzu” (“Among us, in Auschwitz”), a fictional letter to his fiancée. This includes a number of drastic scenes, stories of torture and killing, and descriptions of murder techniques.

And then some vehicles full of naked women arrived at the women's camp. The women were holding out their hands and crying: “Save us!” “They're taking us to the gas chambers!” “Save us!” And ten thousand men came past in total silence. Not a single one of them moved, not a single hand was raised. Because the living are always in the right against the dead.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>“Bydlę!‘ wybuchnąłem.

[...]

„Jak długo siedzisz w obozie?”

„O... parę miesięcy.”

„Wiesz, Tadeusz, bardzo ciebie lubię,” rzekł niespodziewanie, „ale ty głodu to tak naprawdę nie zaznałeś, co?”

„Zależy, co to jest głód.”

„Głód jest wtedy prawdziwy, gdy człowiek patrzy na drugiego człowieka jako na obiekt zjedzenia. Ja już miałem taki głód. Rozumiesz? [...] człowieku, u nas ludzie żywcem chcieli się zjadać! I co, miałem nie zabijać kucharzy, co za masło kupowali wódkę, a za chleb papierosy? Mój syn kradł, to go też zabiłem. [...]”

Przyglądałem mu się ciekawie, jak nowemu człowiekowi.

„A ty, a ty też tylko swoją porcję jadłeś?”

„To co innego. Ja byłem lagerältesterem” (Borowski 1977, p. 39). English translation by J. H.

<sup>16</sup> “I wtedy z FKL nadjechały samochody pełne nagich kobiet. Kobiety wyciągały ramiona i krzyczały: „Ratujcie nas!” „Jedziemy do gazu!” „Ratujcie nas!” I przejechały koło nas w głębokim milczeniu dziesięciu tysięcy mężczyzn. Ani jeden człowiek nie poruszył się, ani jedna ręka nie podniosła się. Bo żywi zawsze mają rację przeciw umarłym” (Borowski 1954, p. 117).



The narrator admits that he himself is caught up in this evil and that he “goes hand in hand with the beast.” He has to act that way to have a chance of surviving. “Proszę państwa do gazu” (“This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen”) is even harsher. Here Tadek takes part in unloading a new transport. He himself is amazed at how, after some time, he feels hatred towards innocent people, who are often going to their deaths.<sup>17</sup>

Tadek asks himself if the world is going to be any better after the end of the war, and answers his own question in the negative: in his opinion a dreadful new kind of civilization is being born in the camps. “You remember how I used to like Plato? Now I know he was lying. Because ideals are not reflected in earthly things.”<sup>18</sup> The ending of the story “U nas w Auschwitzu” is characteristic, when the narrator has a conversation with a friend from the Sonderkomand.<sup>19</sup> His fellow inmate tells him that they gassed an entire Czech family camp. And he adds a technical innovation: “[...] we figured out a new incineration method. [...] We take four children with hair, we throw them in together and set them alight. They burn well and *ist gemacht*.”<sup>20</sup>

This “stone world” holds sway not only in the camps, but also in postwar times, as can be seen in Borowski’s prose work set after the war.

In comparison with Solzhenitsyn’s Ivan Denisovich, Borowski’s inmates often lack any kind of human dignity. This is simply due to the situation in Auschwitz. The Soviet

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<sup>17</sup> “No, you can no longer control yourself. We brutally tear people’s suitcases out of their hands and we rip off their overcoats. Go on, go on, get out of it.” “Nie, już nie można nad sobą panować. Wrywa się ludziom brutalnie walizki z rąk, szarpiąc ściąga się palta. Idźcie, idźcie, przemińcie” (Borowski 1977, p. 73). “For several days the camp will live off this transport: eat its ham and salami, conserves and fruit, drink its vodkas and liqueurs, go about in its underwear, trade its gold and rucksacks. [...] For several days the camp will talk about the Sosnowiec–Bendzin transport. That was a good one—rich.” “Parę dni obóz będzie żył z tego transportu: zjadał jego szynki i kielbasy, konfitury i owoce, pił jego wódki i likiery, będzie chodził w jego bieliznie, handlował jego złotem i tłumokami. [...] Parę dni będzie obóz mówił o transporcie Sosnowiec–Bendzin. Był to dobry, bogaty transport” (ibid., p. 78). English translation by J. H.

<sup>18</sup> “Pamiętasz, jak lubiłem Platona. Dziś wiem, że kłamał. Bo w rzeczach ziemskich nie odbija się ideał...” (Borowski 1971, p. 75).

<sup>19</sup> The Sonderkomands comprised inmates, mostly Jews, who assisted when people arrived for the gas chambers and incinerated the dead bodies. Cf. Friedler, Siebertová, and Kilian (2007).

<sup>20</sup> “[...] wykombinowali my nowy sposób palenia w kominie. [...] bierzemy cztery dzieciaki z włosami, przytykamy głowy do kupy i podpalamy włosy. Potem pali się samo i jest *gemacht*” (ibid., p. 85).



gulags described by Solzhenitsyn are terrible, but they are also more primitive and irrational. They did not have gas chambers. Closer to Borowski's prose works are some of the stories by Varlam Shalamov in *Колымские рассказы* (*Kolyma Tales*) that are set in northeast Siberia. Here the conditions are comparable with those of Nazi liquidation camps. The inmates had to work in gold fields even at temperatures of minus fifty. For example, in the short story "An Individual Assignment" Dugaev finds he is not managing to meet the work norm, being in the same state of apathy that the so-called "musulmans" were in at Auschwitz. The next day the soldiers take him off into the forest, and he realizes that he is about to be shot. "When he realized what was about to happen, Dugaev regretted that he had worked for nothing. There had been no reason for him to exhaust himself on this, his last day" (Shalamov 1981, p. 261).<sup>21</sup> This kind of bleak objectivity is very similar to that of Borowski. In another story, Shalamov's narrator states:

Each time they brought in the soup in large zinc tubs suspended on poles, it made us all want to cry. We were ready to cry for fear that the soup would be thin. And when a miracle occurred and the soup was thick, we couldn't believe it and ate it as slowly as possible. But even with thick soup in a warm stomach there remained a sucking pain; we'd been hungry for too long. All human emotions—love, friendship, envy, concern for one's fellow man, compassion, longing for fame, honesty—had left us with the flesh that had melted from our bodies during their long fasts.

[...]

We'd all learned meekness and had forgotten how to be surprised. We had no pride, vanity, or ambition, and jealousy and passion seemed as alien to us as Mars, and trivial in addition. It was much more important to learn to button your pants in

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<sup>21</sup> "И, поняв, в чем дело, Дугаев пожалел, что напрасно проработал, напрасно промучился этот последний сегодняшний день." (Шаламов 1991, p. 19)



the frost. Grown men cried if they weren't able to do that. We understood that death was no worse than life, and we feared neither. We were overwhelmed by indifference.” (Shalamov, 1980, pp. 56-57)<sup>22</sup>

In the scenes described by Levi, Borowski, and Shalamov, the authority of religion, patriotism and moral humanism do not hold sway, nor is there any respect for human life. All the high ideals have collapsed before the extreme situation in which inmates fight for bare survival. Moreover, it becomes evident that the liquidation camps, particularly Auschwitz, may be a place where a new type of human has emerged in an extreme form, differing considerably from the dominant old European tradition.

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<sup>22</sup> “Всем нам надоела барачная еда, где всякий раз мы готовы были плакать при виде внесенных в барак на палках больших цинковых бачков с супом. мы готовы были плакать от боязни, что суп будет жидким. И когда случалось чудо и суп был густой, мы не верили и, радуясь, ели его медленно – медленно. Но и после густого супа в потеплевшем желудке оставалась сосущая боль – мы голодали давно. Все человеческие чувства – любовь, дружба, зависть, человеколюбие, милосердие, жажда славы, честность – ушли от нас с тем мясом, которого мы лишились за время своего продолжительного голодания. [...] Editor's note: I have highlighted a number of errors in the Russian here, and I suspect there are many more. All non-English languages in this essay should be double-checked for accuracy. Thank you very much! I checked the Russian text and found 4 typing errors.

Мы научились смирению, мы разучились удивляться. У нас не было гордости, себялюбия, самолюбия, а ревность и страсть казались нам марсианскими понятиями и притом пустяками. Гораздо важнее было наловчиться зимой на морозе застегивать штаны – взрослые мужчины плакали, не умея подчас это сделать. Мы понимали, что смерть несколько не хуже чем жизнь, и не боялись ни той, ни другой. Великое равнодушие владело нами” (Шаламов 1991, pp. 31-32).



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