



---

Šárka Vlasáková

## **The Holocaust Through the Eyes of Children and Adolescents<sup>1</sup>: Literary Analysis of Diaries of Mary Berg and David Sierakowiak**

Hundreds of works were created about the Holocaust in the last couple of decades. The most personal testimonies are diaries<sup>2</sup> whose intimacy stems from the lack of intention to publish. This is the case of The Diary of David Sierakowiak from the Lodz ghetto that died in the ghetto and therefore did not have the opportunity to revise the work. On the other hand The Diary of Mary Berg, who interned in the Warsaw ghetto and survived, is stylized and contains distinct narrative strategies which envisage the readership. Both texts were written by teenagers between the ages of 14 and 19 years. “Diaries of the Holocaust written by children or young adolescents seem almost to constitute a distinctive subgenre of the literature of incarceration.”<sup>3</sup>

---

1 The piece is a part of the thesis *The Representation of Shoah: Children Writing the Holocaust* (2011); the chapters devoted to the diary of Ana Novac and to the fictional diary presented in Lustig's book *The Unloved* were partially published (Vlasáková 2012a, 2012b).

2 A specific type would consist of fictional diaries in which historical events are presented to the reader through fictional characters. These include for example Lustig's novella *The Unloved*. The diary of the seventeen-year-old Petra Sch. is a very personal confession within the fiction which at moments uses more diary strategies than actual diaries themselves. In addition diaries there are the powerful tales about the Holocaust, similar to the diaries, narrated by children. Such are for examples Grynberg's books *Jewish War* and *Victory*.

3 Pentlin in Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p xix.



The diaries of victims and survivors of the Holocaust are valuable testimonies of the past. Yet the issues of diary prose have been rather neglected so far. As pointed out by Sue Vice “in general, the diary is viewed as an artless, amateur form which is neither literary nor historical.”<sup>4</sup> According to this author the reason for this general neglect of the non-fiction diary is in part its hybrid character. The diary is perceived both as a historical document and cultural narrative.

## 1. Defining basic concepts

### 1.1 Memory

The importance of social and cultural memory in relation to the Holocaust was lately emphasized especially in the work of Aleida Assmann.<sup>5</sup> According to her memory is becoming less and less of a individual, spontaneous act and increasingly a social and cultural structure. “It is primarily about the relationship between memory and identity (...) cultural processes of recollection, remembrance, perpetuation, references to the past but also the future and last but not least forgetting.”<sup>6</sup>

Memory is one of the first targets of totalitarian regimes that have chosen a specific group of people as victims of its persecution. The Nazis also at first expelled the Jews from Aryan schools and eventually also abolished the special Jewish schools. Intellectuals were forced to abandon their

---

4 Sue Vice, *Children Writing the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 118.

5 Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München: C. H. Beck, 2006); Aleida Assmann /Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Die Zukunft der Erinnerung und der Holocaust* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press 2012).

6 Aleida Assmann, „Paměť jako *ars a vis*“; translated by Jiří Soukup; *Česká literatura* LXI, No. 1, 2013, p. 57.



professions and pursue work as housekeepers or janitors. Like communism later, Nazism destroyed inconvenient books and cultural relics. Both regimes have sought to forge the image of the past. The destruction of cultural memory influences the present and has negative impacts on the future. Therefore the sole defense from non-retention is the establishing of memory.<sup>7</sup>

In the Jewish tradition especially memory has an exclusive status and it has both cultural and religious dimensions. “The privileged status of memory – as a category of national identity, and as cultural and epistemological categories – has its foothold in the Jewish tradition and is codified in the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature.”<sup>8</sup> Jewish memory mainly has the religious dimension, at its core as the memory of God. The covenant with God establishes a mutual promise: God will not forget his chosen people unless the Jewish people forget their God.

By locking in their personal experience of the Holocaust into the form of text the authors demonstrate that they have survived this immense disaster while anchoring this period into historical context. In other words: *I write, therefore there was the Holocaust.*

Forming experience into recollection significantly affects our memory. The factor of human memory significantly shapes the reproduction of a past, which can never be entirely authentic as the memory selects and interprets. According to Zygmunt Bauman to remember means to interpret the past and to interpret the past means to tell a story.

## 1.2 Witness

For the authors of diaries from the Holocaust period the testimonies were primarily a basic

---

<sup>7</sup> Tomáš Kubíček, *Vypravěč: kategorie narativní analýzy* (Brno: Host, 2007), p. 325.

<sup>8</sup> Petr Málek, „Holocaust a kulturní paměť: obrazy – figury – jazyk“; in: Jiří Holý; Petr Málek; Michael Špirit; Filip Tomáš: *Šoa v české literatuře a v kulturní paměti* (Praha: Akropolis, 2011), p. 88.



human need, the literary aspect was only secondary. The authors of these diaries often mention the imperative of preserving and giving testimony as the reason for their very survival.<sup>9</sup>

As noted by James Young the imperative of giving testimony is a significant Jewish concept which has been enshrined in the Talmud. According to this holy book a witness to an event during which Jewish people are wronged has even an obligation to give testimony.

According to Young the testimony is supposed to be without commentary or interpretation, it should record what has been seen and heard. “The quality of eyewitness seems to reconnect a witness's narrative to its human source, thereby reuniting the word with its speaker. This written word is thus infused with the authority of its speaker and, by extension; it is relinked to its object in the world.”<sup>10</sup> The witness becomes an instrument of the event, the scribe a neutral medium of its recording. Through this medium the events tell and record “themselves”. The character of the witness signifies the narrative. In the case of unbelievable events it is the character of the witness that it lends the authority of credibility.

### 1.3 Recording reality – construing reality

Documenting events assumes finding their meaning and significance. It implies the possibility of conveying the testimony to others and teaching about it<sup>11</sup>. According to James Young

---

<sup>9</sup> Sue Vice mentions that these authors viewed the writing of the diary as a moral obligation or even a religious covenant, even though the content itself was not religious. Sue Vice, *Children Writing the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 120.

<sup>10</sup> James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> Young builds here on the Latin word *document* (Documentum – lesson). He also points out the etymology of the French term *docere*, which means *to learn*.



exact recording of reality is not possible. “It is because reality [itself] cannot be recorded that realism is dead. All writing, all composition is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it.”<sup>12</sup> This directly influences the form of testimony. The documentary value becomes a goal, not a characteristic, of the authors of fiction or diaries and memoirs. Young draws attention to different approach taken by fiction authors and authors of diaries to preserve the documentary value: “It is to recognize the difference between narrative that fabricates its authenticity as part of its fiction and that which attempts to salvage, however tenuously, an authentic empirical connection between text, writer, and experience.”<sup>13</sup>

However if both fiction and diaries or memoirs are fabricated, then this fabrication may affect the credibility of the testimony. A testimony is thus perceived as construction of reality rather than as its imprint. The efforts of the witness to revive the relationship between the text and the experience then render the testimony even more artificial. “Indeed, the horrible irony is that, as nearly all the diarists and many of the survivors remind us, their insights, interpretations, and eyewitness descriptions may even be less reliable in a 'factual sense' because of their proximity to the events.”<sup>14</sup> An authentic testimony about the Holocaust therefore does not need to be factual.

## **2. The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak – An Unfinished Story of an Unfinished Life**

---

<sup>12</sup> James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*: 33.



After the war Waclaw Szkudlarek<sup>15</sup> found two filled notebooks beside the stove<sup>16</sup> in his apartment in Lodz which were apparently left here by the Sierakowiak family of which nobody lived at this point. These were the diaries of Dawid Sierakowiak which were published in Poland in 1960 by the editor Lucjan Dobroszycki, who himself survived the Holocaust. Seven years later three other notebooks surfaced, discovered by a journalist from Lodz, Konrad Turnowski, who wanted to publish them with Lucjan Dobroszycki. They were unable to publish the expanded edition due to a new wave of antisemitism in Poland in 1968. The five notebooks were first completely published in English in the edition of Alan Adelson in the year 1996.

The preserved writings of Dawid Sierakowiak start on June 28, 1939, when Dawid was fourteen years and end on April 15, 1943, a couple of months before his nineteenth birthday and four months before his death. Dawid died on August 8, 1943, of tuberculosis and total exhaustion.<sup>17</sup>

In the first entries<sup>18</sup> Dawid describes his arrival and stay at a Jewish summer camp. These are carefree notes of a young boy who is enjoying the summer while missing his family. Four years later he writes as a young man, whose mother was dragged away, whose father had died and who is

---

15 Non-Jewish Poles had to move out of the area that was to become the Lodz ghetto on the orders of the Nazis. One of these Poles was Waclaw Szkudlarek. The family of Dawid Sierakowiak then stayed in his apartment.

16 The notebooks were torn up and at least two were burned. According to the editor of the book this probably happened during the harsh winter of 1945 when there was a dire shortage of firewood in the city.

17 His father died on March 6, 1943 of overall weakness of the heart. His mother was murdered in Chełmno and his sister in Auschwitz.

18 This is most probably not the true beginning of the diary. A mention of the beginning of writing is not included. Likewise the last entry of the preserved diary is probably not the true ending.



---

on the brink of his mental and physical strength.

The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak combines aspects of intimate confession and of a chronicle of world events. He captures the political situation with almost pedantic precision set to the backdrop of life in the ghetto. The author describes the Nazi invasion of Poland, life and the deteriorating conditions in the ghetto, Hitler's speeches on the radio, arrests and mass deportation, the obligation to wear the star, to turn in radios and coats, the risk of deportation. On the other hand he records his personal experiences, his studies, thoughts, fears and desires, difficulties of getting a job, the loss of loved ones.

Dawid focuses on several themes in his narrative that are repeatedly recorded: the situation of world affairs, situation in the ghetto, the experience of himself and of his family and the theme of weather, which he uses to emphasize the mood of himself or the ghetto and as a contrast to the political situation.

## 2.1 The Transformation of the Narrator: A Child in the Body of an Adult and an Adult in the Body of a Child

The rhetoric, thinking and analysis of events changes over the years and it indicates the narrator's gradual maturation, as well as it highlights the broken, unfinished childhood, which flashes through on occasion through the writings of a young man. The book contrasts naive remarks of a boy who admires Lenin, with skeptical entries of a young man who has adult opinions: “A rabbi from Góra Kalwarii supposedly announced that a liberation miracle will happen on the sixth day of Chanukah. (...) This tendency to take comfort from nothing irritates me. It's better not to say anything.”<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Dawid Sierakowiak, *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak*; edited by Alan Adelson, translated by Kamil Turowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 69.



The child's view of the narrator manifests itself through the theme of school. The sheer joy of a child upon success in school contrasts with the reality of war. The narrator himself makes use of this contrast but he lacks the depth of the knowing: “The test took place, but I don't think I did too well. A typical beginning for wartime.” (ibid.: 58) With leaving school and taking up a job one stage of his life ends, Dawid becomes financially responsible for his family, his rhetoric and thoughts change.

The childlike view is further reflected in the narrator's inability to see the historical events in a broader context. He judges global political events hastily and naively: he understands the signing of the nonaggression pact between the Germans and the Soviets as a capitulation of Nazi policy. He interprets Goebbels' statement that they will either be wiped out or they will win, thus: “I think that he is slowly preparing his nation for defeat.” (ibid.: 73) Beatings of Jews in the streets of Lodz represent proof to him that the end of the Germans is in sight. Dawid views the scorning of human dignity as a turning point in which the events should reverse back on the right track, however in the context of the war it is merely the beginning of the persecution of Jews.

The narrator's perception of the world is highly skeptical due to his financial problems and family situation. Expressions of joy and hope are thus in steep contrast with it. “There is almost no trace left of the enormous weight of snow that accumulated recently. The joy because of this is enormous. One more day has been won.” (ibid.: 237) In context of the imminent threat of death by starvation or freezing the melting snow is a cause for joy. At the beginning of the diaries Dawid got pleasure from war victories of the Allies, gradually his values shifted, happiness can come only through specific things that concern him directly, not from the general situation in the world.

His coming of age is captured also in his reflection of the war. At the beginning he is carefree boy who admires Marxism and writes tough sentences about an early end of the war and of



Jewish vengeance: “The Jews won't let Hitler get away with it.” (ibid.: 38) The limited perspective of a child is enhanced by Marxist rhetoric: “I cursed him [the director of the school, Š.V.] in my soul with all my strength, and vowed to settle accounts with him some day 'in another social system'.” (ibid.: 51) He describes the beginning of the war as an adventure. When they are supposed to take shelter from an air raid he has to overcome his curiosity. News from the front stop interesting him once the family begins to feel the lack of food and when they face eviction from the apartment in case they would not manage to pay the rent: “The long-averted Finnish-Soviet war broke out today. But that affair does not concern us as much as the rent.” (ibid.: 66)

Dawid also thematises his family to which he is strongly attached. He relates to his beloved mother, his sister, his father. Dawid had a complicated relationship with his father which he writes more about in the second part of the diary, on how father steals food from the family. Dawid captures the languishing of his father up to his death. However the relationship with his father arouses strong emotions in Dawid, which he writes into his diary but also tries to suppress: “Potatoes are disappearing at a terrifying rate at home. I can't do anything about it, though, and have to grit my teeth and remain silent.” (ibid.: 231)

An important device of the experiencing narrator is his irony and poignant cynicism, which emanate from his difficult living conditions and serve Dawid as a kind of psychological defense: “The barbarity proceeds. They will soon order us to smear tar on our noses and wear shorts.” (ibid.: 70) He states pulmonary disease (ibid.: 91), eating potatoes with peels (ibid.: 154) and in later stages eating just the potato peels (ibid.: 176), as the latest fashion in the ghetto. His own situation becomes the subject of his irony: “Perhaps if I get better work, the war will end 'out of spite!'...” (ibid.: 207); “Not to overeat, that's the important thing” (ibid.: 197) as well as the Jewish authorities. Dawid glosses with irony developments in the ghetto: “The black hearse is becoming extremely popular again.” (ibid.: 242) The narrator mocks even world events: “Roosevelt



supposedly said in some speech that in 1943 the Allies will show what they can do. Soon will come the assurances that the war is 100 per cent certain to end in '43. And everyone will believe that for another year. Provided they stay alive that long.” (ibid.: 244)

## 2.2 Reflection of the "Self" and of Mental and Physical Decline

The narrator will often express emotions, however usually these will be emotions in response to the reality of the ghetto and therefore depersonalized. A purely intimate confession marks the leaving of school: “Last day of school. My last day in gymnasium and the end of a particular period in my life. (...) Damn it, the world is going through so much now, and here I am moved by such a trifle. But yes, it moves me because it's about me, and a new epoch in my life begins.” (ibid.: 133) Dawid is aware of the uniqueness of the feeling precisely because it is his experience, which is not applicable to the entire ghetto. Intense feelings are also depicted in parts devoted to the deportation of his mother and to conflicts with his father (see below).

As noted by Adelson, Dawid seems to capture the decay of his own body with chilling serenity: “I feel awful and look worse and worse. I hear that it's hard to recognize me.” (ibid.: 89) When a family wants to hire him for remedial classes he haggles on the price as he “values his remaining energy”. He realizes how important the level of remuneration is for the preserving his health and that of his family. The haggling is, in a way, a sign of maturity.

The mentioning of deteriorating health intensifies after June 1942. The narrator records a tooth inflammation, swelling of the face, weakening of the body. At the same time it is of bigger importance to him that he does not have to pay for the procedure than the notion of physical pain. The entries are almost detached, impersonal in this regard. He makes no comment of his visits to the dentist that leave his tooth hurting more than before. The topic of physical decay is ubiquitous in the last notebook. His health continues to deteriorate and his family is also struck by problems. His



father contracts lice and scabies, which is then contracted both by his sister Nadzia and Dawid himself. At one point Dawid even mentions an infection in his intimate regions. His health begins to worsen substantially after the death of his father, apparently due to the psychological pressure and the fear of the future.

The entries from the last month depict simultaneously the physical decline of the boy and his growing hope which emanates from changed circumstances. He is offered more remedial classes and given the opportunity to translate the work of Lenin from Yiddish to Polish. His joy intensifies when the prospect of better work emerges: “The weather is most lovely, truly spring. I really feel like living and surviving, but the horoscope looks poor here. Who knows...” (ibid.: 262) In the penultimate entry from the 14<sup>th</sup> of April is written that he got a job in the bakery for three months. His last entry from the 15<sup>th</sup> April is however full of despair: “In the evening I had to prepare food and cook supper, which exhausted me totally. In politics there's absolutely nothing new. Again, out of impatience I feel myself beginning to fall into melancholy. There is really no way out of this for us.” (ibid.: 268) Sue Vice notes that the form of a diary has the potential to cover a long period of time, but in the case of Dawid's diary this is counterbalanced by the narrator's refusing to thematise the future and his growing certainty of a premature death.<sup>20</sup> The last paragraph of the book is the climax of this. In addition, the fate of Dawid leaves a powerful impression on the reader as the book is read with the presumption that the boy did not survive.

Aside from the physical decay the book also reflects the changes in Dawid's psyche. The constant struggle between hope and despair exhausts him. His skepticism is a form of psychological defense as deep in his heart he believes that he will survive the war, he even plans on settling accounts with his father after the war and he discusses the future with his friends: “A few friends and I spoke a lot today about the future, and we have come to the conclusion that if we survive the

---

<sup>20</sup> Sue Vice, *Children Writing the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 128.



ghetto, we'll certainly experience a richness of life that we wouldn't have appreciated otherwise.

May the moment of liberation come at last!"<sup>21</sup>

The most striking reflection of the decay of his physical and psychical "self" is a photograph: "I also got the photo taken a week ago. It came out fine, realistically showing our hungry ghetto countenances. It's only from this photograph that I realize what condition I am in. 'The hourglass on the mug,' as they so rightly say in the ghetto." (ibid.: 187) The photo turns into an epiphany. It is a motif that appears numerous times in literature about the Holocaust, for example in Weil's *Life with a Star* when Roubíček looks into a mirror after a long time.

### 2.3 Reflecting the writing of the diary

Dawid rarely explicitly refers to the diary itself. For example he thematises the diary in relation to starting a new notebook: "I'm beginning a new notebook of my diary, and thus dare to express that it will become the start of a new, brighter, and better period in my life than the one I covered in the preceding notebook. That seems just another pipe dream, though." (ibid.: 77) Although he calls his desire a pipe dream, it is as if his diary represents a higher power to him, when his religious faith declines. The diary becomes a friend to Dawid, to whom he confesses: "I, too, considered the possibility of leaving [the ghetto, Š.V.], but because of my weakness and lethargy caused by hunger, I don't think I have enough strength to go. Besides, I would miss my books and 'letters', notes and copybooks. Especially this diary." (ibid.: 174)

### 2.4 The characters

In the first part of the diary his mother is a prominent character, with whom the boy has a

---

<sup>21</sup> Dawid Sierakowiak, *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak*; edited by Alan Adelson, translated by Kamil Turowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 209.



loving relationship. He reflects her deteriorating health even while not mentioning the health of his sister and father. He refers to family quarrels and to the behavior of his father to his mother. Dawid is reserved in his stance to conflicts, probably remaining silent due to his upbringing. When the threat of transports arrives, he tries to get a job for his mother so that she is not deported from Lodz. Still, in September 1942, she is taken away as too weak by a medical board directly from the apartment: “My most Sacred, beloved, worn-out, blessed, cherished Mother has fallen victim to the bloodthirsty German Nazi beast!!!” (ibid.: 218)

The mother's departure becomes a turning point in his perception of the pain of the ghetto and of his own personal pain. Against the backdrop of his loss Dawid does not care about the lamentation of other mothers, whose children have been dragged off. Formerly he had written about the ghetto and his experiences, his hunger and fear as for a collective, but now his loss is highly personal: “Laments and shouts, cries and screams have become so commonplace that one pays almost no attention to them. What do I care about another mother's cry when my own mother has been taken from me!? I don't think there can be ample revenge for this.” (ibid.: 221) The entry that depicts the taking of the mother is an emotional climax of the whole manuscript:

“Meanwhile, if Mom had only left home, nothing would have happened to her. And so, someone else's baby has been saved in our home, while my mother has been taken. Nadzia screamed, cried, suffered spasms, but these days it doesn't move anyone. I am speechless and close to madness.” (ibid.: 221)

“I couldn't muster the willpower to look through the window after her or to cry. I walked around, talked, and finally sat as though I had turned to stone. Every other moment, nervous spasm took hold of my hart, hands, mouth, and throat, so that I thought my heart was breaking. It didn't break, though, and it let me eat, think, speak, and go to sleep.” (ibid.: 220)



In contrast to his own misery and his mother's despair the narrator describes his father's laxness. While his wife was being taken he ate soup and stole food from the backpacks of his relatives.

In the second half of the diary Dawid increasingly writes about his father. In contrast to those about his mother, these entries are strongly negative. Due to the lack of food his father started stealing parts of rations from his family. Dawid protests against the behavior of his father in silence, the "content" of which changes as does Dawid's attitude towards his father. At first, the silence represents a form of active resistance for the boy, later it is a kind of apathy. Dawid therefore takes his rations to work. He further reflects his father distantly and with rage: "This time I had a fierce argument with Father, who is becoming greedier and more rapacious for every little morsel; he cheats in a stupid, intricate way everywhere he can, which upsets me terribly." (ibid.: 196) The conflicts with the father become the main theme in the last six months of the diary.

The reader learns from the context<sup>22</sup> that Dawid's father has been to prison. After his return from the prison he doesn't wash, he is afflicted with lice, full of scabies and completely besotted. Dawid comments the deteriorating physical and mental condition of his father: "I told him everything I think of him and why I hate him. He doesn't care." (ibid.: 230) Further escalation of the situation is brought by the father's injury. At the hospital, the father clamors for the rations of his children. This moment is another turning point in Dawid's psychological development. The young man realizes the importance of preserving his own life: "We couldn't give him any of our watery soup. He is not the kind of father worth giving up our health for, as our unfortunate mother did." (ibid.: 247) The boy notes the death of the father almost immediately, but the impact shows on Dawid only later. Due to great stress caused by the death of his father he gets a high fever. Dawid is not able to stay in the apartment alone with his thoughts, fears and memories (ibid.: 253). The bed

---

22 The parts of the diary that depict the imprisonment of the father were not recovered.



---

becomes a symbol of the grave in the ghetto for him.

## 2.5 Main motifs

School and education are prominent motifs in Dawid's diaries. Dawid performed well in school and he himself tutored many children. He was proficient in several languages and read literary works in the original languages (*The Forsyte Saga*, *Buddenbrooks*). When his parents forbid him to go to school, as they fear that he will be taken to forced labor, he is unhappy and visits friends to find out what was taught at school. When the Germans ban teaching of Polish history in school and introduce teaching of German instead, he is happy that he will learn a new language, which once again shows his childish optimism. The desire for learning and reading passes through all the parts of the diary.

Similarly to the school, Marxism is a significant motif. Sympathies towards Marxism can be probably attributed to the difficult social status of the family. At the beginning of the diaries Dawid studies the work of Lenin and frequently uses socialist rhetoric: “May the united world bourgeoisie not strike against the free, beloved, great Soviets.” (ibid.: 105) He discusses the difference between the revolution of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie-democratic revolution with his friends. He calls his friends comrades. However due to the worsening living situation he withdraws from the revolutionary youth movement. He still adheres to the ideals of Marxism and utilizes the rhetoric, but it is clear other things are of much bigger importance to him, especially food. He almost does not understand “the comrades” and their view of the world any longer. The gradual departure from Marxism is also one of the moments of his coming of age.

Weather is also an important motif. Dawid frequently uses this motif alongside the description of the political situation: “The Jews are saying again that things are getting better as far as politics is concerned, and that the war will be over pretty soon. Idiotic talk! Everything has



conspired against us. Even the warmth doesn't want to come this year.” (ibid.: 162) “The sun is finally shining again, and the Jews have regained hope.” (ibid.: 154) Tranquil weather becomes suspicious in the context of the ghetto: “The weather's warm and relatively sunny; silent and still, but I feel it's the lull before the storm.” (ibid.: 207)

The theme of the devil is a leitmotif of the entire diary and manifests itself on a number of levels. The devil for example clearly indicates the Germans: “The Devil has taken too much of a hold over us.” (ibid.: 84) The devil also symbolizes higher authority to which Dawid relates and seeks explanations of events around him, and answers to questions about the uncertain future. Last but not least, the devil also represents atonement and despair: “[Father, Š.V.] is tyrannizing at home like never before. I don't protest. Let the Devil take it all.” (ibid.:229) Elsewhere, Dawid uses the image of the devil, stripped of omnipotence, in order to belittle the behavior of Germans: “We know now that the Devil is not as black as they paint him. The stamp [in fact, Š.V.] comes of the body.” (ibid.: 160) Here, Dawid describes the German “tagging” of people by the medical committee, which scared the inhabitants of the ghetto and which no one understood the meaning of. The fact that the supposedly indelible mark gradually disappeared from the body provided Dawid with hope.

Against the background of “infernal” motifs of war and the devil the motif of paradise appears, in a completely low form however. When his father gets a job, Dawid talks about the paradise that would arise if his mother would also find work. The office becomes paradise for Dawid in December 1942. It is his only refuge as at home constant quarrels with the father occur. The paradise becomes an ironic metaphor.

The War and the Germans are naturally the pervasive themes in the book. The war transforms from an abstract to a concrete power, which has its own identity. Dawid logs German advances and defeats, which he usually does not comment, because on the background of the extremely precarious situation in the ghetto they mean nothing to him. The narrator does not



thematised the Germans much. In the context of the ghetto he relates more to the Jewish authorities, and to their head Rumkowski, who represented the executor of the will of the Germans for the inhabitants of the ghetto. When he mentions the Germans he refers to them harshly as “bloody Krauts” (ibid.: 29), “bloody beasts” (ibid.: 113) and notes that “there's something sick about the Germans” (ibid.: 62).

The omnipresent motif of death is manifested on a metaphorical level: “Systematically we are being pushed closer to death”; (ibid.: 155) as well as in reports from Warsaw (describing corpses lying in the streets) and Lodz. Death is also portrayed in the form of a depersonalized statistics. Dawid recounts the death of his friends and classmates, but without reflecting it too much. This changes with the death of his neighbor: “I think his is the first death in the ghetto that has left me so deeply depressed. This man, an absolute athlete before the war, died of hunger here. His iron body did not suffer from any disease; it just grew thinner and thinner every day, and finally he fell asleep, not to wake again.” (ibid.: 121)

The strongest motif of the diary is hunger. Hunger is a ubiquitous reality that kills not only physically, but also mentally: “In some respect Wolman's case makes me less lonely and despondent because I can see I'm not the only one who is being killed spiritually by hunger (physically, it is killing everyone).” (ibid.: 155) Hunger is a master whom you cannot please: “There is almost nothing to fill up this greedy stomach.” (ibid.: 100) In the first part of describing the war he thematises his stomach almost as an enemy, as if it was not even a part of him. A year later he conversely writes: “Just to be able to at least half-stuff my insatiable belly.” (ibid.: 152) Hunger becomes a more significant issue than the deteriorating health, as it is a more specific and current threat, while the shadows on the lungs and heart problems are invisible and therefore unseen.

The motif of hunger reaches its highest intensity in the fifth notebook, which maps the time between November 11, 1942 and April 15, 1943. During this period the young man is without his



mother, his father is dying and Dawid's health is rapidly deteriorating. Less and less food is being brought to the ghetto<sup>23</sup>. The starved inhabitants of the ghetto are grateful even for spoiled food: “The 'fish' are several centimeter-long, salted gudgeon that stink for a mile. Too bad there is so little of it.” (ibid.: 239) Hunger becomes the cause of many moral dilemmas: “When I receive my ration of bread, I can hardly control myself and sometimes suffer so much from exhaustion that I have to eat whatever food I have, and then my small loaf of bread disappears before the next ration is issued, and my torture grows.” (ibid.: 94) Even the uncertain future is viewed in regards to food (ibid.: 189): “If they are going to bury me in this ghetto, let it at least be without cavities in my teeth. Should I, however, get out of here, I'll need to have my teeth in good shape to be able to bite without any problem, to bite all the way!” (ibid.: 188-189)

Dawid also inadvertently records his increasing resistance to hunger and cold. He is puzzled by the fact that although it is around zero degrees outside and it is cold in the house, nobody of the inhabitants even has a cold. He tries to fight the hunger by reading: “As usual in the times of hunger, I have to turn to forced, intensive reading to drive away the sense of deprivation with this 'opiate'.” (ibid.: 244) Also attending a concert and a Variety show helps him drive away the thoughts about food momentarily.

At the beginning of his writings Dawid thematises religion, he leads prayers at the Jewish camp and is angered when the Germans close synagogues during Rosh Hashanah and command the shops be open instead:

“Rosh Hashanah! Open stores! At the same time, synagogues are to be closed. We have no chance to pray communally for mercy. All basic human freedoms are being destroyed. (...) To take away from a man his only consolation, his faith, to forbid his beloved, life-affirming religion is the most

---

<sup>23</sup> The editor points out in a footnote that the Nazis cut the supply of food to the ghetto prior to massive deportations, to weaken the ghetto residents and minimize the resistance.



horrendous crime.” (ibid.: 38)

During Yom Kippur 1939, all fast. Gradually the religious motifs recede. In 1939 he mentions a Chanukah candle, which his father made using a wick and a hollowed-out potato (ibid.: 68). During the 1941 Yom Kippur Dawid still complies with his mother’s silent wishes and fasts. In October 1941 Rumkowski bans the teaching of Talmud in the ghetto. With the departure of the mother, religious motifs disappear from Dawid's life. Rather than to God, Dawid often refers to the devil (see above). At the end of the diary, religiosity is perceived almost negatively: “He is an exceptionally honest and helpful man, albeit very religious.” (ibid.: 234)

## 2.6 Depiction of the Ghetto in Contrast to the Depiction of an Individual

The ghetto forms an opposition to Dawid’s own world and the micro-world of his family. The ghetto is a collective that has its problems, moods and rumors<sup>24</sup>. Like a living organism, it “is buzzing like a beehive” (ibid.: 105), “give them a single quiet day, and the Jews immediately produce rumors.” (ibid.: 109) But the ghetto is also the embodiment of the enemy: “The ghetto will finish us off.” (ibid.: 126) Dawid's thinking often comes into contrast with the thinking of the ghetto: “Oh, this everlasting stupidity, and the naïveté of everyone who believes everything so willingly.”(ibid.: 109)

Dawid captures the mood swings of the ghetto, which influence his mindset: “Everybody lives now with the growing hope for an end of the war in 1942. (...) Feelings of eager excitement,

---

24 According to Dawid the rumor that Hitler is dead twice passed around Lodz before the end of 1939, just because there was no word of him. In November of the same year all members of the Jewish Community Council were arrested. Dawid notes that according to the inhabitants of the ghetto they were all later released. The editor sets these rumors straight in a footnote: all the members of the Community Council were executed.



anxiety, and the most pleasant yearning for liberation are slowly coming over me.” (ibid.: 208–209) New transports of food bring new hope, as well as the occasional achievements of the Allies (such as Churchill's visit to Moscow): “There's finally a tiny spark of hope for us. (...) There's been an incredible uplifting of spirits in the ghetto. The Jews are raising their heads again.” (ibid.: 208) The lack of food and heat and the silence on the political scene conversely sink the spirit of the whole ghetto.

The perception of the ghetto as an undivided collective is supported by the almost uniform fate of its inhabitants (excluding the prominent members). People are completely interchangeable and disposable: “The person was living, the person is dead; we live and die like cattle.” (ibid.: 173)

### **3. The Diary of Mary Berg: Coming to Terms with the Trauma of Survival**

In March 1944, Mary Berg arrived by boat to the USA with her whole family. Upon landing she met a Jewish journalist S. L. Shneiderman, who expressed interest in her Polish written diary consisting of twelve notebooks. It was first published in a magazine in parts translated to Yiddish and then it was published in full in English in February 1945 and became one of the first English language testimonies of the Warsaw ghetto.

As reported by Susan Pentlin, the diary was also published prior to the end of the war due to statements by the representatives of the Allies, that they will not use gas or biological weapons as long as the Germans do not do so themselves. The Diary of Mary Berg was the first English report that described events from the establishment of the Warsaw ghetto to the first deportations that took place between July and September 1942. It was also one of the first testimonies that described the use of gas for extermination of the Jewish population in Treblinka<sup>25</sup>.

---

<sup>25</sup> Pentlin in Mary Berg, *The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing Up in the Warsaw Ghetto*; Edited by Samuel Loele Shneiderman and Susan Lee Pentlin, translated by Norbert Guterman (London:



During her imprisonment in Pawiak Mary rewrote parts of her diary. Her diary is thus a combination of memoirs and a diary. Sue Vice therefore speaks of a hybrid diary while Susan Pentlin uses the term diary memoir. The Diary of Mary Berg combines the narrative about the fate of Mary and her family with narration about events in the Warsaw ghetto. The diary thus does contain features of a *journal intime*, but it can be read only as a *journal externe*.

Mary was aware of the importance of her diary and of the fact that it could endanger herself and her family. Therefore she wrote it in her personal shorthand and marked friends by initials only. She changed the family name to Berg from Wattenberg and also her date of birth. Due to the same reasons she did not write about the Nazis but about “them”<sup>26</sup>. Later in the USA she actively participated in preparing the work for print. She kept the true names of only those people that were either out of danger or already dead. Conversely the names of characters, whose fate was not known and who could be compromised, were changed.

During the war already, Mary had to cope with a strong sense of guilt that later gradually transformed into a trauma, which persisted even after the war. When a journalist asked her in 1945, whether she ever wants to go back to Poland, she replied: “No, I will never go back. America is my country now and I'm going to be a real American. It wouldn't be nice to go back to Poland and see only cemeteries... also my father's family has been killed... so have all our friends. After what we went through, I know what freedom really means... it means America.”<sup>27</sup>

---

Oneworld Publications, 2007), p. xviii.

26 The similar indications in Weil's novel *Life with a Star* (“they”, “those”) hold a rather tabooing or anonymizing function.

27 Pentlin in Mary Berg, *The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing Up in the Warsaw Ghetto*; Edited by Samuel Loele Shneiderman and Susan Lee Pentlin, translated by Norbert Guterman (London: Oneworld Publications, 2007), p. xxxi.



The Diary of Mary Berg is divided into eighteen chapters, which cover the period from October 10, 1939 to March 5 (15), 1944. They are listed in chronological order. However, the arrangement of chapters is thematic. The composition of the diary is very well thought out. It cannot be said with certainty whether the composition was the original intent of the author or if it emerged during later rewriting and editing. In addition to the narration of Mary Berg herself, the diary also contains narration by different characters, excerpts from letters of friends and relatives or a reporter's voice on the radio.

The narrator combines a number of different texts and lets voices of many characters be heard. The embedded letters and accurate quotes from them emphasize the authenticity of the text and Mary's commitment to balance. The presence of another narrative voice also functions as a strong appeal to the reader: "Remember, there are still 40,000 Jews left in Warsaw, and they are waiting for help from outside. Don't forget them."<sup>28</sup> Conversely, paraphrasing reduces the credibility of the narrator: "Uncle Abie writes that if we can do something for him to do it as soon as possible, because he does not know whether he will be able to remain at the same address very long."<sup>29</sup> A different strategy of the narrator is a combination of a narrative voice with a quotation from a letter: "We were standing in a long line,' she writes, 'all of us workers from Aschman's factory...'" (ibid.: 189)

When presenting events, the narrator tries to provide the maximum available information

---

28 Quote from a letter by Mary's friend Romko, Mary Berg, *The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing Up in the Warsaw Ghetto*; Edited by Samuel Loele Shneiderman and Susan Lee Pentlin, translated by Norbert Guterman (London: Oneworld Publications, 2007), p. 209.

29 Mary Berg, *The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing Up in the Warsaw Ghetto*; Edited by Samuel Loele Shneiderman and Susan Lee Pentlin, translated by Norbert Guterman (London: Oneworld Publications, 2007), p. 218.



obtained from various sources: “According to official figures, there are 450,000 inhabitants in the ghetto, but actually there are many more, because this number does not include the unregistered fugitives from the provincial towns (...). It is estimated that the total is really more than 500,000.” (ibid.: 145) In describing the event, to which she was not present, Mary relies on the telling of her friends and strangers (when describing the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising she quotes her friend and a letter by a stranger, who wrote about the Uprising) and these lend witness validity to the narration. Even when she is the sole source of information, she tries to provide a multilateral perspective: “Today there are no more returns and there are no trains for the inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto, only a red-hot pavement and hordes of children who get entangled in one's feet and beg for a crust of bread. True, not all the children beg. Many of them earn their living, often much more easily than their elders.” (ibid.: 64) Similarly, in the recounting of the relationship of Polish Jews to Poland, she presents some that are proud they are Polish and some that are ashamed of it. The narrator takes a critical view of printed sources of information. The narrative style of describing major events is factual, concise and journalistic:

One hundred and ten persons have just been shot in the Gesia Street prison, among them ten policemen. (...) The victims went to their death in complete calm. Some even refused to be blindfolded. Among the victims there were several women, two of them pregnant. After this crime had been perpetrated in front of witnesses, Pinkiert's funeral cars took the bodies to the Jewish cemetery. There is general mourning in the ghetto... (ibid.:148).

The suppression of commentary is typical for the narration of Mary's diary. The narrator styles herself as a witness and a chronicler, who describes what she sees and hears and leaves it to the reader to form his own view: “This café is the meeting place of the most important smugglers and their mistresses; here women sell themselves for a good meal.” (ibid.: 81)



When capturing various topics she often works on the range of generality – specificity. She treats the story as a camera shot, the arrangement of information resembles the focusing of a camera lens:

“The well-to-do Jews managed to escape the Lodz Ghetto by various means. Some bribed the Gestapo, like my friend's family; others smuggled themselves out in coffins. The Jewish cemetery is outside the ghetto and it is possible to carry dead persons there. Some people had themselves boarded up in caskets, which were carried off with the usual funeral ceremonies. Before reaching the cemetery, they rose from their coffins and escaped to Warsaw. In one case the person locked in the coffin did not rise up again: his heart had failed during that short and ghostly trip...” (ibid.: 16-17)

The juxtaposition of thematic segments in the diaries is often strongly contrasting. The chapter "Spring Is Cruel" begins with a description of spring and of blooming plants, followed by a description of transports, of the Ljubljana massacre, of a threat of a pogrom in Warsaw and of executions. Thereafter the narrator recounts the beauty of spring again. The venture of uncle Abie follows, who almost gets shot. The chapter ends in a description of sunbathing, and the smell of spring and of lime trees. This unusual sorting of thematic units may be evidence of an increased toughness of perception of the ghetto inhabitants and of the fact that sometimes normal life continued in the ghetto to the backdrop of war, people did not live in constant fear.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.1 Transformation of the Narrator

Mary started writing the diary when she was fifteen and she finished it five years later. Her

---

<sup>30</sup> Pentlin in Mary Berg, *The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing Up in the Warsaw Ghetto*; Edited by Samuel Loele Shneiderman and Susan Lee Pentlin, translated by Norbert Guterman (London: Oneworld Publications, 2007), p. xxiii.



juvenile view manifests itself in the imagination, which she introduces into the event, which she sees: “Today when I went to the courtyard I saw a tall, apparently well-dressed young man standing near the garbage can. He was one of those who, before the war in Poland, studied the humanities without having to worry about their daily bread.” (ibid.: 61) A child’s view is also reflected in an attempt to escape reality into the world of fantasy: “And when I received it [a book, Š.V.], my mattress ceased being dirty, I no longer felt the fleas or the hunger. I read the life of Catherine, who was a real heroine and behaved with great courage in difficult circumstances.” (ibid.: 200-201)

By contrast, the maturity of the narrator is manifested in her own opinion, which she sticks to regardless of the prevailing public opinion. She stands up for the chairman of the Jewish authorities Czerniaków, who is otherwise a target of criticism and satire in the ghetto. According to her Czerniaków is in a difficult position. While he rides in the car of a Nazi chief, the Governor-General Frank, he always returns a broken man. He bears the heavy burden of responsibility for everything that happens in the ghetto. Also the trauma of guilt is a manifestation and proof of the narrator's early maturity.

The author constructs her narration as a chronicle of the memories of the Warsaw Ghetto during the Holocaust. She records cultural and social life in the ghetto, maps exact street names (Zielna 31, Chłodna Street). From the position of an omniscient narrator registers the deaths of important people, which she comments almost in a form of obituaries:

“President Adam Czerniaków has committed suicide. He did it last night, on July 23<sup>rd</sup>. He could not bear his terrible burden. (...) His closest collaborators, who saw him shortly before his death, say that he displayed great courage and energy until the last moment.” (ibid.: 167)... We were also told by our informants that Dr. Korczak was forced to witness the executions, and that he himself was shot afterward. Thus died one of the purest and noblest men who ever lived. He was the pride of the ghetto.” (ibid.: 170)



The narrator often styles herself into a witness, who observes and records the events around her. Her own direct experiences are the uttermost form of eyewitness testimony. She was in the streets when a hunt for people began. A Jewish policeman pulled her into a passageway: A moment later, on the very spot where I had been standing, a man fell, struck by a bullet. A lamentation ran through the crowd like an electric current, and reached through the closed door of the stationery store. The fallen man groaned for a while, but was soon taken away in a hand truck. The janitor at once proceeded to scrub the still-warm blood from the pavement (ibid.: 89).

The narrator also observes through her window (both in the apartment and at the Pawiak prison). Mary for example sees a man through the window that buys bread and immediately gobbles it up. She describes that the man is still hungry but he cannot afford to buy another loaf of bread: “All he can do now is lie down in the snow and wait for death. (...) Hunger will destroy them, and each morning another body of an old man with a blue face and clenched fists will be found lying in the snow.” (ibid.: 39) The motif of a window in regards to the Warsaw Ghetto is reminded by Jacek Leociak in his memoir.<sup>31</sup> Commented observation through a window can however be deceiving and can reduce the credibility of the narrator. Recall for example the famous novel by Alain Robbe-Grillet, *La Jalousie*. Similarly subjective is the narrator's commentary of children smugglers, who exercise their “craft” every day despite of mortal danger: “The next morning, the little foragers try once more (...). Perhaps the same kindly guard will be there who let them pass once before.”<sup>32</sup>

---

31 Jacek Leociak, *Tekst wobec Zagłady. O relacjach z getta warszawskiego* (Wrocław: Leopoldinum, 1997), p. 179.

32 Mary Berg, *The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing Up in the Warsaw Ghetto*; Edited by Samuel Loele Shneiderman and Susan Lee Pentlin, translated by Norbert Guterman (London: Oneworld Publications, 2007), p. 65.



Conversely, logging the "seen" without commentary enhances the effectiveness of narration. In the chapter "Typhus" the narrator describes a woman: "Then she tried to get up again with the help of her stick, and finally succeeded. She took a few steps, began to totter, leaned stubbornly upon her stick, and suddenly began to beat the wall with her head, crying, 'People, have mercy on me, kill me!'" (ibid.: 79)

In the absence of information from her own sources, the narrator relies on the testimony of others. Thus she mediates the story of Heniek Grynberg, who traded with anti-typhus serum, and is therefore a credible witness. The mysterious meaning of the letter from uncle Percy, who writes that he left Ljubljana just in time, is illuminated by a family friend, whose narration Mary introduces with the words: "Here is his story." (ibid.: 134)

An ironic context, which was probably not intended by the author, is the description of evening in the Pawiak prison and the fighting against apathy and depression: "The rest of us are trying to maintain our morale, and each evening we gather in one of the rooms and discuss various subjects. We also feast on stolen turnips, while everyone tells of his experiences." (ibid.: 192) The foreign internees thus maintain the morale, but at the same time "feast" on stolen food.

The narrator explains circumstances to the potential readers, that they cannot know themselves: "There is even sugar, butter, cheese – of course for high prices, for people have risked their lives to get these things." (ibid.: 32) Elsewhere she even relates to a ex-textual level, she for example addresses foreign journalists: "Where are you, foreign correspondents? Why don' you come here and describe the sensational scenes of the ghetto?" (ibid.: 80)

### 3.2 Reflecting on Writing

Mary does not thematise her diary itself too much. When she mentions it, her entries vary from between the awareness of the importance of the diary and despair that consumes her entire



---

personality and she therefore deems the diary insignificant:

“I have not written anything here for a long time. What good does it do to write; who is interested in my diary? I have thought of burning it several times, but some inner voice forbade me to do it. The same inner voice is now urging me to write down all the terrible things I have heard during the last few day.” (ibid.: 222)

The importance of the diary as a testimony however passes through and forms the entire text. It is just not often mentioned. This culminates at the close of the diary:

“I will tell, I will tell everything, about our sufferings and our struggles and the slaughter of our dearest, and I will demand punishment for the German murderers and their Gretchens in Berlin, Munich and Nuremberg who enjoyed the fruits of murder, and are still wearing the clothes and shoes of our martyred people.” (ibid.: 249)

### 3.3 Characters

The Diary of Mary Berg is a complex testimony, which tries to cover the life of the whole ghetto on a relatively small space, thus little focus is devoted to the rendering of specific characters. Moreover the narrator suppresses personal statements in the diary and records only facts and events that are connected to the war. Even the recorded emotions are associated with the war. The diary does not contain her desires and thoughts about the future, as compared to the Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak.

The narrator pays marginal attention to depicting her family. In case of her father she focuses exclusively on the situation he found himself in. Although these described situations are very emotionally tense, the narrator does not comment:

“To get this bread my father had to stand for hours in a long line in front of a bakery. As he waited



there, several German planes suddenly swooped down and strafed the people with machine guns. Instantly the line in front of the bakery dispersed, but one man remained. Disregarding the firing, my father took his place behind him. A moment later the man was hit in the head by a bullet. The entrance to the bakery shop was now free and my father made his purchase.” (ibid.: 5)

The character of her mother is markedly associated with her American citizenship:

“Then one of the drunks [Gestapo officers, Š.V.] drew out his revolver and shouted 'Swear on Hitler's health that you're an American citizen or I'll shoot you on the spot!' But Jews have been forbidden to utter the Führer's sacred name. My mother asked whether an exception would be made in her case. The Nazi smiled and put his revolver back in its holster. After an unsuccessful search for the things he and his friend wanted, they left, clicking their heels and saluting the American flag that hung in the hallway.” (ibid.: 13)

Even this scene lacks emotion. With the prospects worsening, Mary begins to persuade her mother to report herself to Gestapo as a member of an enemy nation, which could lead to the internment of the whole family and then to deportation to America. She in fact forces her mother to inform on herself and her family, which would be a completely absurd situation in a non-war context. With increasing efforts of the mother to register the family for internment, the frequency of recording her emotions increases, however the emotions of the narrator are not reflected in the text: “My mother is terribly upset because Nikolaus registered only her and my sister Anna.” (ibid.: 150) The reflection of emotions increases in relation to the growing sense of guilt: “My mother had tears in her eyes when she opened her package [from the Red Cross, Š.V.] (...). We placed all these things on the table, and danced around out of sheer joy. Then we prepared for our feast. And we thought all the time, how could we send some of these things to Warsaw?” (ibid.: 216)

At the end of the diary, Mary leads an imaginary conversation with Rutka, the last words of the author's story are dedicated to this girl. At first Rutka appears in the book sporadically as the



best friend of the narrator's sister Anna. A turning point occurs when Rutka recovers from typhus. She ceases to be mentioned only in connection with Anna and a strong bond develops between Mary and Rutka. The girl sends letters to the narrator to the internment camp in Vittel. Just before the departure for the USA, Mary receives a desperate letter from Rutka, stating that she has been robbed of her papers and money. The narrator thinks of the girl constantly and this is, amongst other things, why the last words are dedicated to her.

The narrator captured tens of characters that she has met during the war in her diary. She portrayed characters from the circle of her young friends, the head of the Jewish authorities Czerniaków, she described her classmates from the courses and inmates from Pawiak. She mentioned characters that were according to her worth remembering, such as the nurse Helen from Vittel. In addition to those that she has personally met, she captured even nameless victims of war, which she observed through her window and she included sketches of a couple of them in the diary. She usually presented a whole type on the fate of one human being – the description of the well-dressed man searching through the garbage captured the unselective nature of hunger, the scene with the child smuggler captured the whole phenomenon of smuggling in the Warsaw Ghetto.

### 3.4 Space and Time

Most of the story takes place in Poland, towards the end it shifts to Vittel in France and it culminates with the arrival into the USA. The book distinctly combines the genre of a diary with that of a memoir. The hybrid nature of the diary manifests itself, for example, in the narrator's anticipation of future developments. This narrative strategy culminates at the end of the book. The last entry is dated 5<sup>th</sup> of March, but within it the author writes about her arrival to New York on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March. The last sentence: “A little more patience and all of us will win freedom!” (ibid.: 249) implies an intervention from the narrator and gives the impression that it was written



subsequently. In the course of the story ideas emerge of which it cannot be said with certainty if they are anticipation of the future or conversely retrospective rewriting. When the family sees the first German prisoners, the narrator comments: “They wore elegant uniforms – they smiled insolently. They knew they would not be prisoners for very long.” (ibid.: 4)

The book combines the form of a diary written in the present tense with retrospectively narrated memories. The summarizing view is revealed even in the names of the chapters (“Life Goes On”; “Another Year”). The diary contains both entries written in the present tense and entries that record and reflect events after a greater time interval: I haven't written for a long time, now I will write it all.

The entries in the diary of Dawid Sierakowiak have a high frequency. Dawid logged the life in the Lodz Ghetto almost daily. In contrast, Mary's entries are not that frequent, especially at the beginning of the diary. From October 1939 up to the end of the year Mary wrote only ten entries. During the year 1940 she wrote one to four days a month. Some months completely lack an entry, like October 1940, when it was the author's birthday. The core of the story, in terms of frequency of writing, lies in the years 1941 and 1942, which are divided into fourteen out of the eighteen chapters. The weeks of internment in Pawiak are thoroughly described, while the author also keeps track of the developments in the ghetto. The year 1943 and the first three months of 1944 contain only a few entries. The journey of the family to the USA, which forms the last part of the book, was recorded by the author day by day. Due to the fact that Mary actively participated on the publishing of the book, it cannot be ruled out that some entries were deliberately eliminated.

The entries from the narrator's birthdays serve as time indicators documenting the development of family and social situation:

October 10, 1939 (Lodz)



---

“Today I am fifteen years old. I feel very old and lonely, although my family did all they could to make this day a real birthday. They even baked a macaroon cake in my honor, which is a great luxury these days. My father ventured out into the street and returned with a bouquet of Alpine violets. When I saw it I could not help crying.” (ibid.: 1)

October 10, 1941 (Warsaw Ghetto)

“Today the first snow has fallen. Strangely enough, every year since the outbreak of the war the first snow has fallen on my birthday. From the adjoining room comes the smell of freshly baked cookies. Miss Sala is bustling about in the kitchen, preparing a meal for the guests I have invited. Her little hands are moving fast. I can see her putting tiny pieces of dough carefully on a pan. My God, how terribly thin she is! (...) Now she is in the kitchen, preparing cookies for my well-fed friends, while her family suffers so terribly from hunger.” (ibid. 98-100)

October 10, 1942 (Pawiak prison)

“Today is my birthday. I spent all day on my mattress. Everyone came to congratulate me, but I did not answer. That night my sister managed to snatch three turnips, and we had a real feast to celebrate the occasion.” (ibid.: 190)

October 10, 1943 (camp Vittel)

“Yesterday was the Day of Atonement, and today is my birthday. I feel very old, despite the fact that I am only nineteen. My mother prepared a surprise party for me and invited all the youngpeople in the camp. They tried to create a cheerful mood, but their artificial gaiety only saddened me.” (ibid.: 236)



On the birthdays the entries are full of emotions, which are normally withheld by the narrator. During the war an intense feeling of guilt and selfishness grows in her (see below) and she tries to cope with it. The birthday celebration in the Vittel camp can be clearly distinguished from the earlier celebrations, which took place in the warmth of home and smelled of cookies. In the vastly different condition of the Pawiak prison, stolen turnip becomes a “real feast”. Mary now finds herself in a similar situation to her friends, whom she pitied in the previous years for their empty stomachs. Last birthday party shows once again a change to the balance of power. The narrator is safe and warm again and has access to proper food, but she suffers from depression and feelings of guilt and loneliness.

### 3.5 Coping with the Trauma of Guilt and Survival

The author was privileged. She had an American mother and the financial background of her family was good. The girl therefore realizes that she has better chances for survival than others and she is plagued by feelings of guilt. When the maid prepares the meal, Mary is unnerved by the disparity between her (relatively) well-nourished friends and the starving family of the maid. She herself, on the other hand, is driven by hunger, which multiplies her guilt.

She views her hopes for freedom, which stem from her privileged position, as selfishness: “Meanwhile, snow is falling slowly, and the frost draws marvelous flower patterns on the windowpanes. I dream of a sled gliding over the ice, of freedom. Shall I ever be free again? I have become really selfish. For the time being, I am still warm and have food, but all around me there is so much misery and starvation that I am beginning to be very unhappy.” (ibid.: 38) In the eyes of her friend Romko, Mary is a small child that cannot understand “real” life, which he embodies, as he has to work hard physically and does not have money. This approach upsets Mary and enhances her feeling of guilt.



The feeling of guilt gradually transforms into trauma. The narrator asks herself if she had a right to leave. This culminates after the family's departure from Warsaw, when their living conditions improve dramatically. Instead of enjoying her happiness and freedom Mary keeps thinking of Warsaw and often has nightmares: "The longer I remain in Vittel, the clearer and sharper in my mind are the faces of the friends and relatives with whom I lived in the ghetto. I have many nightmares." (ibid.: 218) Her thoughts predict the future. The reader cannot be sure whether these allusions were present in the text from the beginning or whether they were inserted later as a part of the narrative perspective.

The journey by ship to New York meant new life and freedom to all the Jewish passengers. The narrator is however saddled with the sense of freedom: "But, strangely enough, in the infinity of the ocean I constantly saw the bloody streets of Warsaw." (ibid.: 247) Mary's desire to give voice to the whole tale of her friends and of the Warsaw Ghetto, which is expressed in the end of the book, is the author's way how to deal with the trauma of guilt of survival.

### 3.6 Main Motifs

The American flag is a strong motif in the diary. It takes to a sacred significance, a miraculous sign. The "U.S. citizen" sign on the door is a talisman, a U.S. passport commands respect: "My mother, as an American, is still allowed to leave the gates of the ghetto. As she leaves, she shows her passport, and the Nazi guard salutes her with great respect as he returns this American document." (ibid.: 30-31)

The religious theme of paradise, in connection with the change of hierarchy and life values in the ghetto, acquires a different meaning. For the boy narrator from Lodz, paradise is a journey to the Aryan side, where he sees normal life, people in the streets and open shops. The narrating girl identifies paradise as the Vittel camp. They are behind bars, but in comparison to the three years



they have just lived through it is paradise. Similarly, the Pawiak prison is paradise: “The Germans kept counting us. I do not know whether they did it out of fear that someone was missing or that someone had sneaked into this paradise behind iron bars.”(ibid.: 159) The paradise in prison contrasts the hell outside. The motif of paradise, however, of course also takes on an ironic meaning.

To the Germans the narrator refers as “Germans” or “Nazis”. This factual, unemotional labeling may be due to retrospective replacement of the original “they” (see above). Very rarely she labels the Germans “beasts” (ibid.: 224) or insatiable sadists (ibid.: 173). She refers to Nazism and Hitler's propaganda as to “infection” (ibid.: 140) and to anti-Semitism as “poison” (ibid.: 139).

The motif of hunger takes on several forms in the diary of Mary Berg. It is hunger that fleshes out the essential social differences and deepening misery of war:

“Hunger is assuming more and more terrible forms. (...) It is not easy to walk in the street with a parcel in one's hand. When a hungry person sees someone with a parcel what looks like food, he follows him and, at an opportune moment, snatches it away, opens it quickly, and proceeds to satisfy his hunger. If the parcel does not contain food, he throws it away. No, these are not thieves; they are just people crazed by hunger.” (ibid.: 110)

The narrator often associates the motif of hunger with begging, she illustrates the transformation of a refugee to a beggar on it. Another narrative strategy is formed by capturing the hunger of children. These belong amongst the most powerful moments in the book:

”I have visited such a refugee home. (...) On the floor I saw half-naked, unwashed children lying listlessly. In one corner an exquisite little girl of four or five sat crying. I could not refrain from stroking her disheveled blond hair. The child looked at me with her big blue eyes, and said 'I'm hungry.’” (ibid.: 60)

The narrator also captures the hunger of the soul: hunger for information and for books,



which she puts almost on a par with physical hunger: “All of us threw ourselves on the books with the same impatience with which we throw ourselves on food.” (ibid.: 199)

At times the narrator also incorporates references to weather; these however have a marginal function compared to the diary of Dawid Sierakowiak. The narrator uses motif of weather as contrast: “The sky was red, and for a moment I thought that a building was burning, but it was the sunrise, as red as the blood that has been shed in the streets of Warsaw for the past three years.” (ibid.: 157)

### 3.7 Capturing the ghetto

As presented by the narrator, the ghetto represents a certain space and characters that inhabit it. It also is a synecdoche for all the Jews that live in it. The ghetto lives through their common feelings: “America's entry into the war has inspired the hundreds of thousands of dejected Jews in the ghetto with a new breath of hope.” (ibid.: 111) “Today the ghetto had a bloody Wednesday. The misfortune everyone expected has struck.” (ibid.: 164) The ghetto is a symbol of resistance and a source of strength: “The typhus epidemic itself is the subject of jokes. It is laughter through tears, but it is laughter. This is our only weapon in the ghetto – our people laugh at death and the Nazi decrees. Humor is the only thing the Nazis cannot understand.” (ibid.: 104) Ghetto becomes a community that allows individuals to keep faith.

The motif of the ghetto often forms one peak of a triangle, the other two of which are “the Jews” and “blood”. The narrator combines these motifs into gradating units that resonate with each other: “The sky was of a pure blue color, completely cleansed of the early morning redness, just as the ghetto pavement was washed of the blood that had been shed during the night. It seemed to me that never before had there been such a clear beautiful day in the ghetto.” (ibid.: 157)

The narrator suffers from nightmares in which Warsaw is drowning in blood. To contrast



the blood she uses the metaphor of snow: “A thick layer of snow has covered the pavements, but I cannot forget that under this clean white blanket the stones are stained with human blood.” (ibid.: 205)

#### 4. Conclusion

All books on the Holocaust, which were written by authors that have lived through it, are highly personal testimonies. The format, which they have chosen for their account, greatly determines the final shape. The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak therefore is of great value from a documentary point of view, as it has not been revised. It presents authentic entries with a minimal level of stylization. Mary Berg survived the Holocaust and later modified her account, thus weakening the authenticity.

The diary form presumes the establishing of intimate, highly personal themes. This applies to Sierakowiak's diary, but not to Berg's, which accents public affairs at the expense of personal experience and which is closer to a *journal externe*.

The effort to bear witness to the Holocaust passes through all the works tackling these topics and determines their final form. The shape of the testimony varies. Mary Berg provides collective testimony; her book is primarily a chronicle. Dawid's diary is an authentic, non-stylized testimony of the life of the boy's family and of life in the Lodz Ghetto. When we apply the testimonies of these authors to the term of construing reality, which we have defined at the beginning, we come to the conclusion that the narrators, Mary and Dawid, try to maintain an authentic empirical connection between the text, author and experience.

The works combine scenic presentation of events without commentary (showing) with commented description and narration (telling). Mary Berg describes the world around her as she sees it but also inserts her own commentary. The main motif of her narration, in this regards, is the window, which on one hand guarantees authenticity, on the other it is a means of the narrator's



interpretation. Dawid Sierakowiak uses both narrative strategies in his efforts to provide an informative, comprehensive picture of his life and that of the ghetto. According to David Roskies, facts alone were never the goal of works directly thematising the Holocaust. “What was remembered and recorded was not the factual data but the meaning of the desecration.”<sup>33</sup> Young adds that the very extreme reality in itself surpasses the ability of language to describe and represent, therefore, the Holocaust is represented by archetypes and myths (ibid.: 17).

The unifying motif of most works on the Holocaust is guilt. This theme is most prominent in the work of Mary Berg, who feels guilty for her privileged status and even when free cannot stop thinking of her friends in Poland. Dawid Sierakowiak blames himself in his diary for not preventing the taking of his mother.

The child or adolescent narrators shape the world of both these books. This is manifested not only through vocabulary or syntax, but also through a limited view of the world or simplified descriptions of events. The childlike narration shows in the authors, it is reflected in their expressions of joy and their naivety. Both in Dawid Sierakowiak and Mary Berg adult narration is also present, documenting their early psychological maturing.

Humor is a surprising motif of both the diaries. Although it often is, in the words of Mary Berg, smiling through the tears, it is evidence that despite escalating restrictions the life in the ghettos went on and that their inhabitants sometimes tried to view their fate with certain detachment. The motif of hunger is also strongly present in the diaries.

Said works need to be read in the context of the Second World War and of the Holocaust, without applying moral criteria which belong to peacetime. Only in the context of the Holocaust can Mary's persuading of her own mother to report herself to the Nazis be understood, as it implied the

---

<sup>33</sup> Roskies in James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 19.



possibility of departure to America for the whole family. Also only in this context is, for example, the theft of food in Mary's diary and other works taking place in ghettos and camps justifiable. However exactly of these reasons is the behavior of Dawid's father, who stole food from his family, indefensible.

Sierakowiak's work is also of great relevance as it documents post-war anti-Semitism. The editors of *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak* were prevented from publishing the complete work. In addition to partial cues, certainly there was fear that description of Nazi totalitarianism will be compared to practices of harassment and persecution of Stalinist and neo-Stalinist totalitarianism.

## Bibliography

Assmann, Aleida. *Der lannge Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München: C. H. Beck, 2006)

Assmann, Aleida / Hartman, Geoffrey H. *Die Zukunft der Erinnerung und der Holocaust* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press 2012)

Assmann, Aleida., „Paměť jako *ars a vis*“; translated by Jiří Soukup; *Česká literatura* LXI, No. 1, pp. 54–61, 2013

Berg, Mary. *The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing Up in the Warsaw Ghetto*; Edited by Samuel Loele Shneiderman and Susan Lee Pentlin, translated by Norbert Guterman (London: Oneworld Publications, 2007)

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernita a holocaust*; translated by Jana Ogrocká (Praha: Slon, 2010)

Cieslar, Jiří. *Hlas deníku* (Praha: Torst, 2002)

Doležel, Lubomír. *Narativní způsoby v české literatuře* (Praha: Český spisovatel, 1993)

Fridman, Lea Wernick. *Words and Witness: Narrative and Aesthetic Strategies in Representation of the Holocaust* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000)



Holý, Jiří (ed.). *Holokaust – Šoa – Zagłada v české, slovenské a polské literatuře* (Praha: Karolinum, 2007)

Jedličková, Alice. *Ke komu mluví vypravěč? Adresát v komunikační perspektivě prózy* (Praha: Ústav pro českou a světovou literaturu AV ČR, 1992)

Kubíček, Tomáš. *Vypravěč: kategorie narativní analýzy* (Brno: Host, 2007)

2004 „Obrana paměti: čas a skutečnost v české literatuře sedmdesátých let, jejich povaha a důsledky aneb Co způsobuje narativ“; *Česká literatura* LII, No. 3, pp. 324–353

Lederbuchová, Ladislava. *Průvodce literárním dílem. Výkladový slovník základních pojmů literární teorie* (Praha: H+H, 2002)

Leociak, Jacek. *Tekst wobec Zagłady. O relacjach z getta warszawskiego* (Wrocław: Leopoldinum, 1997)

Málek, Petr. „Holocaust a kulturní paměť: obrazy – figury – jazyk“; in: Jiří Holý; Petr Málek; Michael Špirit; Filip Tomáš: *Šoa v české literatuře a v kulturní paměti* (Praha: Akropolis, 2011), pp. 67–134

Mocná, Dagmar (ed.). *Encyklopedie literárních žánrů* (Praha/Litoměřice: Paseka, 2004)

Podolska, Joanna. *Children of Łódź Ghetto* (Bilbo: Łódź, 2004)

Riesel, Petr. „Práce s vlastním traumatem holokaustu: identita, asimilace, vyrovnání se současností“; *Česká a slovenská psychiatrie* CVII, No. 1, 2011, pp. 47–53

Richterová, Sylvie. „Etika a estetika literárního deníku“; *Kritický sborník* XII, No. 2, 1992, pp. 12–18.

Rosenfeld, Alvin H. *Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997)

Sierakowiak, Dawid. *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak*; edited by Alan Adelson, translated by Kamil Turowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)



---

Stanzel, Franz K. *Teorie vyprávění*; přel. Jiří Stromšík (Praha: Odeon, 1988)

Vice, Sue. *Children Writing the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004)

Vlasáková, Šárka. „Choral Narration of the Holocaust through Children’s Eyes“; in: Jiří Holý (ed.): *The Representation of the Shoah in Literature, Theatre and Film in Central Europe: 1950s and 1960s* (Praha: Akropolis, 2012a), pp. 129–141

Vlasáková, Šárka. „Ana Novac’s *The Beautiful Days of My Youth* and Arnošt Lustig’s *The Unloved*“; in: Jiří Holý (ed.): *The Representation of the Shoah in Literature and Film in Central Europe: 1970s and 1980s* (Praha: Akropolis, 2012b), pp. 73–88

Young, James E. *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990)