

JEWES AND GENTILES IN BOROWSKI'S CONCENTRATION UNIVERSE¹

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«I saw the death of a million people—literally, not metaphorically»²

1. Auschwitz “on another planet”

The survivors of the Nazi extermination camps had to communicate an experience that bordered on incomprehensibility and inexplicability, because, (as two of them declared), «What Auschwitz was is known only to its inmates and to no one else» and «those who saw the Gorgon have not returned to tell it or have returned mute».³

Only writers who found narrative forms appropriate to their horrific experiences in death-camps managed to accomplish this arduous task. Among them there are also some great non-Jewish authors, such as David Rousset, Jorge Semprun, Robert Antelme and Tadeusz Borowski.

Born in 1922 and dead by suicide in 1951, Borowski spent more than two years in three concentration camps (Auschwitz, Natzweiler-Dautmergen and Dachau-Allach): his stories appeared immediately after his liberation in *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu* [*We were in Auschwitz*, 1946, with J. N. Siedlecki and K. Olszewski], *Pożegnanie z Marią* [*Farewell to Maria*] and *Kamienny świat* [*A world of stone*] both from 1947. Celebrated by Hermann Langbein as a «keen observer»,⁴ he covers a prominent position in the Holocaust Discourse canon in the United States and in Germany: but his works were translated with great delay and are still little known in Italy.

Borowski did not have so much the purpose to reconstruct his real personal experience, as to focus on representing from the inside the process of alienation of the deportees: that's why he does not explicitly condemn the atrocities he witnesses. Aware that in the lager «evil was not the work of one side»,⁵ he constantly reminds us that in order to survive one must participate in the economy of looting and extermination (much attention is paid to Canada, the large warehouse into which are crammed all kinds of goods confiscated from prisoners).⁶

For this reason, Tadek, the first-person narrating voice in *Farewell to Maria* and Borowski's alter ego, does not play so much the role of victim, as that of a witness submerged in an atrocious reality: his frequent encounters with the other prisoners and his “organizing” tell us a lot about the camp marked privileges and inequalities. Rather than in the individual characteristics of the prisoners, Borowski

¹ I will refer to the following editions of T. BOROWSKI, *Proza I*, ed. S. BURYŁA WL, Kraków 2004 (henceforward PI); J. NEL SIEDLECKI, K. OLSZEWSKI, T. BOROWSKI, *We were in Auschwitz*, Welcome Rain Publishers, New York 2000 (henceforward WW). *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, Penguin, New York 1976 [henceforward TWG].

² Borowski's letter to H. Laskowska (22 february 1946), in T. DREWŃOWSKI (ed.), *Postal indiscretions. The correspondence of Tadeusz Borowski*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2007, (henceforward PI), p. 73.

³ H. LANGBEIN, *People in Auschwitz*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill-London, p. 512; P. LEVI, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Simon and Schuster, New York 2017, p. 70.

⁴ LANGBEIN, *People in Auschwitz*, p. 210.

⁵ Borowski's letter to Z. Świdwińska (5 february 1946), PI, p. 58.

⁶ Borowski refuses to distinguish between «altruistic» and «selfish» use of Canadian goods, as another Auschwitz survivor, the Catholic writer, Zofia Kossak Szczucka will do (EAD., *Z otchłani*, Polski Dom Wydawniczy, Rzym 1946).

seems interested in the physical, mental and behavioral homologation.⁷ If Primo Levi in *If This is a Man* gives the narrator the traits of the Jew-witness, Borowski portrays Tadek as a “lagered” man.⁸ His «curt, icy, and brutally direct»⁹ narrative aims to represent the adaptation to the concentration system, renouncing the accusations of Nazi barbarism and the vibrant exaltations of inner resistance so noticeable in Robert Antelme.¹⁰

Many survivors have pointed out that the camps were an upside-down world where elder age, high class and culture did not guarantee prestige or preeminence, but on the contrary humiliation and high risk. That is perhaps also why Borowski does not give us particular information about the social, professional or linguistic origins¹¹ of the prisoners, whose background is recalled only in rare cases: those who insist on remembering their past (as the German Jewish doctor who keeps saying «*Wir Preussen*» [*Człowiek z paczką* (The man with the package), TWG, p. 150], or the elderly Zugang wearing tails who repeats «*Ich will mit dem Herrn Kommandanten sprechen*» [*Proszę Państwa do Gazu* (This way for the gas...), TWG, p. 46], take on pathetic and even comical traits.¹² Borowski does not even seem interested in the differences between the various Jewish types, coming from very different countries and social environments, languages and cultures.¹³ Nearly none of them ascend to the rank of a real character: this is a further element distinguishing him from portraitist Primo Levi, who right in Auschwitz discovers and describes several characters of Ashkenazi Judaism. Borowski’s attention rather focuses on some details, infallible hints of the way that prisoners could survive: their jaws, gait, glances¹⁴. The *Muzelman*, for example, appears to Tadek as some mindless body, guided only by the conditioned reflex of hunger,¹⁵ a

⁷ Also Robert Antelme has underlined how in the camps the original differences between faces and bodies were erased by hunger, terror and despair: «One is transformed. The face and the body drift adrift, here neither beautiful nor ugly no longer exist. In three months’ time, we will still be different and less and less different from each other» (R. ANTELME, *L’espèce humaine*, La cité universelle, Paris 1947 [I quote, and translate, from the Italian edition, *La specie umana*, Einaudi, Torino 2000, p. 103]). All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

⁸ According to A. Werner, Tadek exists only inside the lager, it is the demonstration «of what the lager can make of a man» (A. WERNER., *Zwyczajna apokalipsa, Tadeusz Borowski i jego wizja świata obozów*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1971, p. 143).

⁹ A. ALVAREZ, *The Literature of the Holocaust*, «Commentary», 5 (1964), pp. 65-69.

¹⁰ Just think of the emphasis of this passage: «If you went to see an SS and showed him Jacques, you could say to him: “Look at him, you have reduced this man [...] to a rejection, a wreck [...]”. Well, we’ll tell you: [...] “With Jacques, you never won. You wanted him to steal, he didn’t steal. You wanted him to kiss the Kapos’ ass so he could eat, he didn’t. You wanted him to laugh while a Meister was pummeling a comrade, he didn’t laugh. [...] You rejoice at this wreck, but the robbed are you, rotten to the core”» (ANTELME, *La specie...*, p. 105). It is no coincidence that Borowski does not make the slightest mention of the Resistance activity at Auschwitz, describing the *Sonderkommando*’s revolt merely as an attempt to anticipate the Nazi liquidation (*The death of Schillinger*, TWG, p. 146)

¹¹ The only exception is the ending passage of *The man with the package*: «I do not know why, but it was said later around the camp that the Jews who were driven to the gas chambers sang some soul-stirring Hebrew song, which nobody could understand» (TWG, p. 151): it was probably the Zionist song *Hatikvah* (Hope) (today the national anthem of Israel): we know it was sung in Auschwitz on the way to the gas by some Jewish deportees (cf. L. NISSIM MOMIGLIANO, *Ricordi della casa dei morti e altri scritti* [1946], La Giuntina, Firenze 2008, p. 58).

¹² Rousset also recalls the ridiculous incongruity of any reference to the roles of civil life: when a countryman reduced to atrocious conditions presents himself as a lawyer from Toulouse, he must barely suppress a laugh (Id., *L’Universo concentrazionario*, p. 62).

¹³ Langbein recalled that the Jews were the least homogeneous group (though the largest) in the whole Auschwitz (Id., *People in Auschwitz*, p. 78).

¹⁴ Cfr. E. FRĄCKOWIAK, *Dzień na Harmenzach T. Borowskiego*, in *Nowela. Opowiadanie. Gawęda. Interpretacje małych form narracyjnych*, ed. K. Bartoszyński, M. Jasińska-Wojtkowska, S. Sawicki, PWN, Warszawa 1979, pp. 461-462.

¹⁵ Significant is the passage of *Homo sapiens i bydlę* “Homo sapiens and animal” from the already mentioned collective work *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu* “We were in Auschwitz, 1946”: «The *muzulmen* willingly paid for half a

«physically and mentally totally depleted human being, who no longer has the strength or the will to fight for life»¹⁶. Among them, in the story *Dzień na Harmenzach* [A day at Harmenz], is also the old porter from Salonica, who «knew twelve Southern languages»:

Pod oparszywiałą świerzbem i wrzodami skórą grają dziwnie wyraźnie, jakby oddzielone osobno, mięśnie, uśmiech łagodzi napięte rysy twarzy, ale czającej się gorączki w oczach nie może zgasić [P1, p. 136]

(Under the skin covered with scabs and sores, the muscles played with a strangely distinct movement, although they were quite separate from the rest of him. A smile softened the outline of his tense face, but could not extinguish the permanent fever in his eyes) [TWG, p. 53]

The Jewish-Polish writer Henryk Grynberg accused Borowski of not writing a Jewish story of Auschwitz and representing the «un-artistic truth of the Shoah only as an abstract tragedy of humanity, suspended in a sidereal space, as on another planet»,¹⁷ These accusations can be partly justified: in his prose and poetry work (in which references to Jews are nearly absent) actually, Borowski does not give a prominence to the topic of the Shoah (that is perhaps also why hides depiction of the Jewish condition in extermination camps has not been particularly investigated).

However, some remarks might be added to Grynberg's assessment. The writer probably does not speak explicitly of Jewish extermination also because, as a Pole, he cannot forget that until the spring of 1943 in Auschwitz even political civil prisoners and even children were killed in the gas chambers or with phenol. Secondly, in the 40's and 50's WW2 exterminations were perceived in a different way from today,¹⁸ as a universal massacre in which one did not distinguish the priority of the Jewish genocide.¹⁹ It was a common interpretation after the war, the enormous scope of the Holocaust will emerge only later: Borowski, who committed suicide in 1951, will not be able to focus it on time and entirely: it would be therefore wrong to accuse him, on the basis of our current historical consciousness, of «not having seen what nobody, or almost nobody, had been able to see».²⁰

It should be added that at the time he was arrested by Gestapo, in February 1943, the author of *A world of stone* was reading Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. The estrangement of his depiction of Auschwitz, so stigmatized by H. Grynberg, probably derives from this significant experience. Borowski's concentration camp is actually a claustrophobic caste-based world,²¹ where the massacre of prisoners is

bowl of soup with a broken nose, a torn ear, or several bruises. I saw how the crowd fighting for access to the barrel knocked it over and gathered drops of soup out of the gutter with trembling hands» [WWA, p. 17].

¹⁶ BOROWSKI, *Określenia oświęcimskie* (Auschwitz terms, WWA, p. 193; in this issue the term is translated as *Muzulman*).

¹⁷ H. GRYNBERG, *Holokaust w literaturze polskiej* and *Obsesyjny temat*, in Id., *Prawda nieartystyczna*, PIW, Warszawa 1994, pp. 158-160 and 199 (his accuse is extended too to Zofia Nałkowska's *Medaliony* [Medallions, 1946]). Also D. KULESZA seems to agree with Grynberg (*Polish camp literature. A few questions about a synthesis that is missing*, in *The literature in/after concentration and extermination camps*, ed. A. MORAWIEC, «Acta Universitatis Lodzensis, Folia Litteraria Polonica» 46 8 (2017), pp. 26-28).

¹⁸ «After WW2 [...], there began a spontaneous process of developing a hierarchy of the victims [...]. At the top, there were political internees as those who fought the regime, those who received the glory of the heroes and steadfast fighters as if by default». BURYLA, *Lager – Literature – Zones of silence*, in *The literature in/after...*, p. 65.

¹⁹ G. D. Rosenfeld defined totalitarianism and fascism as the two interpretative categories of the Holocaust of the first two decades after WW2 (Id., *The Politics of Uniqueness: Reflections on the Recent Polemical Turn in Holocaust and Genocide Scholarship*, «Holocaust and Genocide Studies», 13, (1999), 1, pp. 30-31).

²⁰ See the acute considerations of E. Traverso on the uneasy reception of the Shoah among German and French post-war intellectuals (Id., *Auschwitz e gli intellettuali. La Shoah nella cultura del dopoguerra*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2004 p. 204).

²¹ Like David Rousset and Robert Antelme, Borowski introduces the reader into the pyramidal structure of the lager, that Levi does not seem to focus well in *If this a man* (cf. E. MATTIODA, *Primo Levi fra scienza e letteratura*, in *Voci dal mondo per Primo Levi: in memoria, per la memoria*, ed. L. Dei, Firenze University Press,

managed with Tayloristic methods²² and a bizarre Newspeak is spoken (the *Lagersprache*, the form of linguistic communication which Borowski explicitly mentions). This brutal and absurd reality is passively and generally accepted.²³ Jan Błoński observed about Borowski's depiction of the concentration camp:

The victim must [...] accept the absence of values, the clearest evidence of the inevitability to give in to force. The sky must become empty and every possibility of imagining a law inconceivable morality. Only power relations remain.²⁴

The contemplation of an empty sky does not only make an inner moral law unimaginable: even the past and the outside world seem to have become inconceivable: the inmates rarely remember them, no one tells why he has been catapulted into the lager. This Kafkaesque nightmare borders on the manipulation of the minds in dystopian societies.²⁵ Even some metaphors used by the narrator, such as lorries as rabid dogs, the wind as a blade of ice, etc. refer to the brutal reality of the system.²⁶ The concentration universe is therefore not only an absolute present, but announces the beginning of a new era, projecting itself into an endless future.

2. *The Jews*

Although Borowski does not remark the disparity of the different ethnic groups in the lager,²⁷ he does not overlook the pariahs: Jews, Russians, Gypsies. He also makes us understand how some privileges, such as receiving parcels from home, are only for "Aryans": in *A day at Harmenz* when Becker asks for food before going to the gas chamber, Tadek and Kazik consume the bread and meat they received from home (p. 80). In *Auschwitz our home* Tadek describes also the special tortures reserved for Jews in the Pawiak, the infamous Warsaw prison:

Firenze 2007, p. 126).

²² The lorries that go back and forth from the ramp to the gas chambers are described as a huge assembly line, while the new arrivals are called *transports*, with a euphemism from the *Lagersprache* [TWG, passim].

²³ In a passage inspired by Borowski's story *U nas w Auschwitzu* [Auschwitz our home], Hanna Arendt defined the apathy of the victims, as «an automatic response to the challenge of an absolute meaninglessness» (H. ARENDT, *The Destruction of six millions. The Jewish World symposium*, in EAD. *The Jewish Writings*, eds J. Kohn and R. H. Feldman, Schocken Books, New York 2007, p. 494).

²⁴ J. BŁOŃSKI, *Biedny Polacy patrzą na getto*, WL, Kraków p. 84.

²⁵ On the dystopian elements in Borowski's prose, cf. G. TOMASSUCCI, *Abitare l'apocalisse: la narrazione dell'universo concentrazionario di Tadeusz Borowski*, in A. BALDACCI, A. M. BRYSIAK, T. SKOCKI (eds), *Variazioni sull'apocalisse. Unpercorso nella cultura occidentale dal Novecento ai giorni nostri*, Peter Lang, Berlin-Bern, 2021, pp. 97-114.

²⁶ Cf. J.E. YOUNG, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1988, pp. 104-105; A. ZIĘBIŃSKA WITEK, *Holocaust. Problemy przedstawiania*, UMCS, Lublin 2005, p. 94.

²⁷ This absence does not imply indifference: cf. *Literatura polska wobec zagłady: 1939–1968*, BURYŁA, D. KRAWCZYŃSKA, J. LEOCIĄK (eds), IBL, Warszawa 2012, p. 499. Unlike Borowski, Kornel Filipowicz, detained at Groß-Rosen and Sachsenhausen, in the story *Chleb oddany* [The Bread Returned] (1947) delineated deep-rooted racial biases and the Polish prisoners' isolation from the Jews (cf. also FELDHAY BRENNER, *The Final Solution...*, pp. 131-132). Catholic and anti-Semitic writer Zofia Kossak instead exalted the courage and resistance of the Polish prisoners, pitting them against the passive or cruel Jews (in the case of Kapos): Z. KOSSAK, *Z otchłani*, pp. 130-131; cf. C. TONINI, *Il tempo dell'odio e il tempo della cura. Storia di Zofia Kossak, la polacca antisemita che salvò migliaia di ebrei*, Silvio Zamorani, Torino 2005, pp. 172-173.

Znasz piwnice Pawiaka? Te żelazne podłogi? Otóż Żydzi nadzy, z rozparzoną po kąpeli skórą, czołgali się po nich tam i z powrotem, tam i z powrotem. Widziałeś kiedy buty żołnierskie od spodu? Ile tam gwoździ? Otóż Kronschiidt włożył takimi butami na gołe ciało i jeździł na czołgającym się człowieku. Dla Aryjczyków było z tym łagodniej, czołgałem się wprawdzie, ale na innym oddziale i nikt na mnie nie włożył. [P1, p. 51].

(You remember the cellars of Pawiak, the metal floor they had down there? Well, the Jews, naked, their bodies steaming after a hot bath, were forced to crawl over them, back, and forth, back and forth. And have you ever seen the soles of military boots, studded with heavy nails? Well Kronschiidt, wearing such boots would climb on top of a naked man and make him crawl while he rode on his back. The Aryans were not treated quite as badly, although I too crawled on the floor, but in a different section, and nobody climbed on top of me) [TWG, p. 118].

During transport on cattle trains Witek, a young Polish man who became Piepel of Kronschiidt, recalls other forms of sadism:

- A z tego nic - rzekł Witek - bo Żydzi jeżdżą jeszcze gorzej. I nie masz czym się chwalić. Zdania były podzielone i co do jazdy, i co do Żydów. [P1, p. 60]

(Big deal – said Witek – Jews travel in much worse conditions, you know. So what do you have to brag about?

Opinions were divided as two modes of travel and as to the Jews [TWG, p. 127].)

As elsewhere, here too Tadek records speeches and opinions without any comment, it is up to the reader to interpret them. A similar reference to “divided” opinions informs us of the continuing of anti-Semitism and widespread aggression against the weakest, the same psychological mechanisms, well-powered by the Nazis, in order to foment the contrasts between the prisoners' groups.²⁸ Shortly afterwards Staszek accused the Jews of being capable to sell their own mothers for turnip soup, while Tadek himself, ravaged by his atrocious experience on the ramp, turns his grudge not against the SS, but against the *Zugangs*, the newcomers [*This way for the gas...*, TWG, p. 40].

Many of Tadek's inmates are capable of “organizing”, even at the cost of damaging the others. The writer does not hide the fact that such psychic processes involve every group and that the prisoners' passivity guarantees the survival of the system: the figure of old Becker is emblematic. Borowski knows well that in the concentration camp the downfall of a prisoner from a privileged position coincides with his almost immediate physical elimination (this fate will also happen to the Jew Schreiber in the already mentioned short story *The man with the package* [TWG, pp. 147-151]). Before getting to Auschwitz, Becker was a *Lagerälteste* in a small camp, who, in order to maintain discipline, had his own son hanged. He then falls into disgrace and is boycotted by the other inmates, including Tadek, who whistle a popular camp motif called *Crema* (the crematorium). Becker gives the most fitting definition of hunger («real hunger is when one man regards another man as something to eat» [*A day at Harmenz*, TWG, p. 54]) and recalls the indifference of many Poles to Jewish extermination:

“- Nasz lager - tam - był mały... Tuż obok drogi. Drogą chodzili ludzie ładnie ubrani, takie kobiety. Na przykład w niedzielę do kościoła. [...] A dalej wieś, taka zwykła wieś. Tam ludzie mieli wszystko, o pół kilometra od nas. A myśmy mieli brukiew... Człowieku, u nas ludzie żywcem chcieli się zjadać!”

Our camp, over there, was small, right next to a road. Many people walked along that road, well-dressed men, women too. They passed on their way to church on Sundays, for instance. [...] farther on was a village, just an ordinary village. There, people had everything, only half a mile from us, and we had turnips ... Good God, our people were ready to eat each other! [*A day at Harmenz*, TWG, pp. 54-55].

²⁸ Cf. LANGBEIN, *Nota*, in ANTELME, *La specie umana*, p. XVIII.

In *Pożegnanie z Marią* [Farewell to Maria], set at the end of 1942, two fugitives from the Warsaw ghetto emerge from the crowd of other figures:²⁹ one young woman and the elderly owner of a construction company. The latter, welcomed by one of her former employees, waits to find a safer haven (later, when she realizes that her daughter cannot reach her, she will return to the ghetto). The young narrator, who is not anti-Semitic and who had so far recorded his arrival in a neutral manner, suddenly notices new details in her:

Stara zajadała powoli, ale z apetytem. Złoty masywny rząd zębów z lubością zanurzał się w miękiszu bułki. Wpatrywałem się w ich połysk, oceniając instynktownie wagę i wartość całej szczęki. [P1, p. 121]

(She ate slowly, but with appetite. The massive row of gold teeth was sinking with voluptuousness in the marrow of the sandwich. I began to stare at the glow of it, instinctively assessing the weight and value of the entire denture. [translation mine])

This observation brutally sums up the contradictions of an occupied city, turned into a jungle, where it is now lawful to hunt men, reifying them into their “commercial” value.³⁰ However it would be unfair to accuse Borowski of being a cynical anti-Semite, indifferent to the Jewish persecution and extermination, without distinguishing the author from his protagonist.³¹ We should be well aware that the writer shaped a narrator not entirely autobiographical, who instead internalized the persecution rules and moved in Auschwitz as if he were at home. The Polish title of one of Borowski’s stories is *U nas w Auschwitzu* [Auschwitz our home]; Ruth Franklin argues that it could even be translated as «We are Auschwitz».³²

As already mentioned, Borowski is among the witnesses who underscored the prisoners’ adaptive mechanisms rather than their efforts to save their dignity: however, there are exceptions to this rule. In his lager stories some female figures stand out as capable of preserving pity and humanity, unlike the

²⁹ In Polish literature, the motif of the fleeing Jew returns in several important writers of Jewish origin (including A. Rudnicki, I. Fink, H. Grynberg, H. Krall, M. Głowiński) and in some non-Jewish authors who also represent the anti-Semitism of many of their fellow countrymen: in addition to T. Borowski J. Andrzejewski’s *The Holy Week*, Z. Nałkowska’s *By the Railway Track*, and K. Filipowicz’s *Krajobraz, który przeżył śmierć* “The landscape that survived death”).

³⁰ R. Feldhay Brenner noted that «In occupied Poland, the edict of Jewish extermination established a tripartite construct of German perpetrators, Jewish victims, and Polish witnesses. The new communal configuration locked all three communities in a status quo that precluded any navigation of emotional adherence as well as the possibility of any cultural interaction» (FELDHAY BRENNER, *The Final Solution*, p. 124); cf. M. TOMCZOK, *Mydło - mięso - opał. Granice fantazji polskich świadków Zagłady*, «Teksty drugie», 29 (2018), 3, pp. 336-338.

³¹ In his review of the German translation of Borowski’s stories, while appreciating their narrative power, Arno Lustiger accused their author of all infamy, even ignoring that his fiancée was half-Jew. In his opinion the Polish author portrayed many «Jewish prisoners [...] as merciless sadists” and himself as «a pampered and spoilt Kapo with enhanced life-expectancy, [...] [who] elevates himself without a trace of sympathy or empathy above the defenseless Jews who are condemned to death [...]. [Borowski] freely admits that while he harmed no one in the camp, he also helped no one». Lustiger’s article, originally appeared in German in «Die Welt» (January, 2007), was published also by the magazine, «Signandsight»: A. LUSTIGER, *Auschwitz, our home*, 15.02.2007 [<http://www.signandsight.com/features/1178.html>, last accessed June 2020]. Also C. Bigsby identified the character of Tadek with his author, interpreting the story *This way to the gas* as a confession (C. BIGSBY, *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust: The Chain of Memory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 344 and 355). Quite the contrary: Borowski has widely shown the spread of anti-Semitism in the camps and in postwar Poland. In *Odwiedziny* (The visit), the last short story from *The world of stone*, he described Polish people searching gold among the Jews’ ashes (P1 p. 325).

³² R. FRANKLIN (*A Thousand Darkneses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction*, Oxford University Press, New York 2011, p. 24). The German toponym Auschwitz is normally indeclinable in Polish, unlike the Polish name Oświęcim: in this story Borowski declines it, to give a defamiliarizing sense of familiarity to the term.

mass of males who suffer, but introject the Nazi-camp rules.³³ They are the Slovak Jewish girls, the Block Elders of Birkenau, who «had retained their femininity and human kindness» (*The people who walked on*, TWG, p. 88: these words sound very unusual for Borowski).³⁴ Similarly, two beautiful and wise young women belonging to the mass transport from Sosnowiec-Będzin (15,000 Jews instantly gassed on arrival)³⁵: they consciously choose death, as soon as they «cross the threshold between the world of the non-lager and that of the lager».³⁶ The first woman instantly intuits the truth and spontaneously climbs into the lorries headed to the gas chambers (*This way for the gas*, TWG, p. 44), the second throws sand into the eyes of the *Lagerführer* Josef Schillinger, picks up his gun and wounds him to death (*The death of Schillinger*, TWG, p. 144-146).³⁷

There is also a young Jew with whom the narrator feels uncommonly sympathetic: Zbigniew Namokel, the silent young man actually met at Pawiak prison, the only character about whom Borowski reports both first and last name. Namokel appears in the short story *The Boy with the Bible* [The Boy with the Bible (P1, pp. 345-356)]: his fate is also remembered (with a quite different version) by Kapo Kwaśniak, in another Borowski's story, *Opowiadanie z prawdziwego życia* (A tale of life lived, translated in English as *A true story*),³⁸ This fact makes us more and more uncertain about the truth of the events narrated: in the first story, the young boy is shot at the Pawiak with other Polish political prisoners, while in the second one he dies of typhus at Auschwitz.

The author of *Farewell to Maria* is also very sensitive to what David Rousset has called the *ubuesque* element of concentration camp life, the tragic «buffoonery», bordering on the abomination, with a Célinian taste.³⁹ This specific kind of humor derives only in part from the unintentional ridicule of the efficiency-crazy Nazis, «cannibals in half sleeves».⁴⁰ Unlike Rousset, who described «the offices ever more crowded with employees, impeccable, busy, serious, grey-faced prisoners from a Kafkaesque universe...»,⁴¹ Borowski's attention is mostly turned to some involuntarily farcical aspects of the prisoners' lives:

Na drodze Andrzej ćwiczy dwóch Żydów. Nie umieli maszerować, kapo połamał im na łbach dwa kije i zapowiedział, że się muszą nauczyć. Andrzej przywiązał im po kijku do nogi i tłumaczy, jak może: «czortowe wy diety, taj dywyś, ce lewa, a ce prawa, links, links»! Grecy otwierają szeroko oczy i maszerują w koło, ze strachu szurając nogami po ziemi. Ogromny tuman kurzu wzbija się wysoko w górę. [P1, p. 155].

³³ The contrast is marked in the scene in which a group of naked Jewish women led to the gas chambers call out for help to ten thousand inmates, waiting at the gate, who remain motionless and in deep silence (*Auschwitz our home*, TWG, p. 116).

³⁴ In all probability they are the same Slovak Block elders accused by KOSSAK (*Z otchłani*, p. 130).

³⁵ Cf. H. L. PARMET, *Images of the Jew Focused on in the Translated Polish Works of Tadeusz Borowski, Jerzy Andrzejewski, and Czesław Miłosz*, «Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies», 18 (2000), 3, p. 18. Also the Polish-Jewish poet Stanisław Wygodzki and Art Spiegelman's father belonged to the same transport.

³⁶ KULESZA, *Kobiety w obozowej prozie Tadeusza Borowskiego*, «Konteksty Kultury», 14, (2017), 4, p. 406.

³⁷ This is an incident that really happened in October 1943 with the famous dancer Franciszka Mann (1917-1943) and was quoted by many survivors. It inspired also the novel *Modlitba pro Kateřinu Horovitzovou* (Prayer for Kateřina Horovitzová, 1964) by a Czech Jewish former deportee, Arnošt Lustig. Also Rudolf Hoess spoke about this episode in his trial deposition. In Borowski's story the anticipation from October to August 1943 and the transformation of the controversial Warsaw dancer (who was even accused of collaborationism) into an anonymous deportee from Sosnowiec-Będzin are significant.

³⁸ BOROWSKI, *Opowiadanie z prawdziwego życia* (P1, p. 261-265; in English TWG 158, pp. 157-160).

³⁹ D. ROUSSET, *L'Univers concentrationnaire*, Éditions du Pavois, Paris 1946 (I quote, and translate, from the Italian edition, *L'universo concentrationario*, Baldini & Castoldi, Milano 1997, p. 30).

⁴⁰ This definition was coined by Primo Levi in an essay on the *Endlösung's* «bureaucracy» (LEVI, *Cannibali in mezze maniche* [1952], now readable at <https://www.lindiceonline.com/osservatorio/cultura-e-societa/speciale-primo-levi-integrale/>, last accessed June 2020).

⁴¹ ROUSSET, *L'universo...*, p. 31.

(On the road Andrzej is teaching two Greek Jews to march. They do not know how. The Kapo has already broken two whips over their heads and warned them they must learn, or else... Andrzej tied a stick to each of their legs and tries his best to explain: «You no good bastard, can't you understand what's left, what's right. Now the left, then the right! *Links! Links!* » The terrified Greeks, their eyes popping, march round and round in a circle, shuffling their feet along the gravel. A huge cloud of dust rises in the air. [TWG p. 73]).

Without further explanation, similar to a dream, the scene may make us smile, but only because we still do not know that a few pages later, following Kapo's orders, Andrzej will kill the clumsy *Muzelmen*. As elsewhere, here too, the narrator mutes the atrocities relegating them to the background. We attend to the events as through a filter, like Tadek, who never stands still to observe a single situation and shields himself from emotions with a «thick skin».⁴²

Borowski pushes himself even further, quoting some atrocious anecdotes, without the slightest comment: Moise meets his father *Zugang* and lies about the gas chambers that await him; Abramek of the *Sonderkommando* invents a quicker way to burn the little kids' corpses (*Auschwitz our home*, TWG, p. 142); the Jew in love with Mirka, a stocky and privileged girl from the Puff, risks his life to bring her eggs and milk, but can do nothing when she gives birth to a baby, *Ludzie szli* «The people who walked on», TWG pp. 88-89 and 97, the Estonian *Muzelman* justifies the cannibalism perpetrated on the corpses of Russian prisoners, *Kolacja* «The supper» TWG, p. 156.⁴³ Though not comic, such episodes become «stories», thanks to the detachment between the events narrated and their perception: they often end with a gallows punchline.

All this reinforces the paradox and absurdity of life in the lager,⁴⁴ but Borowski is not interested so much in some farcical aspects of the Nazi organization,⁴⁵ so emphasized by David Rousset. His destabilizing black humor is rather self-mocking, sharpening the perception of living in an upside-down world, where every bond has been severed and every form of ethical code is outdated. In my opinion, it is not a hysterical reaction to traumatic and unacceptable events⁴⁶ or a devilish laughter tainted by Nazi sarcasm, mocking Jews as non-human beings.⁴⁷ Borowski's humor rather expresses the inmates' awareness of self-degradation,⁴⁸ it is akin to certain concentration camp songs, such as the *Tango truponoszów* [Tango of the carriers of corpses], sung by prisoners in Sachsenhausen⁴⁹. The role played by the maca-

⁴² LANGBEIN, *People in Auschwitz*, p. 70 and 480.

⁴³ Episodes of cannibalism occurred in various lagers, even after the liberation. David Rousset recalls: «We shall guard the dead [...] and kill those who will eat that miserable and putrid flesh of corpse» (Id., *L'universo concentrazionario*, p. 40).

⁴⁴ L.L. Langer (*The Holocaust and Literary Imagination*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1975, p. 212) defines as «never far from hysteria» Rousset's attitude, a definition which could also apply to Borowski's sense of the macabre.

⁴⁵ In his stories appear in a farcical light Dr. Mengele (a «kindly satyr» in his gay Tyrolian hat), the *Unterscharführer* on the bicycle, who orders to massacre the Greeks (TWG p. 108; 76) and the SS with a tremendous revolver, nicknamed «weed, because it always popped up where no one had sown it» (*The people who walked on:* in the English translation this passage was omitted).

⁴⁶ «One has a mad desire to laugh when one does not understand»: ANTELME, *La specie umana*, p. 43. Cf. A. M. JATON, F. CIORALLI, *Andata e (non) ritorno. La letteratura dello sterminio tra storia e narrazione*, ETS, Pisa 2015, pp. 167-169.

⁴⁷ Among the many who have accused of nihilism Borowski, cf. Gustaw Herling Grudziński, who remarked in his concentration camp tales «a smidge of hellish and desperate giggle» (G. Herling Grudziński, *Dziennik pisany nocą*, I, WL, Kraków 2011, p. 492).

⁴⁸ Other texts exist, written by lager prisoners, which used self-irony to narrate the concentration camps: *Stara gwardia* [The Old Guard], a play by Mieczysław Lurczyński (1946), two satires written in Majdanek by Stefania Perzanowska and *Le Verfügbar aux enfers* by the French Germaine Tillon (quoted in JATON, CIORALLI, *Andata e (non) ritorno*, p. 170). Cf. the chapter *Śmiech w piekle* [Laughing in Hell], in *Oświęcim nie znany*, ed. Z. Jagoda, S. Kłodziński, J. Masłowski, WL, Kraków 1981, p. 156.

⁴⁹ Cf. A. KULISIEWICZ, *Polish Camp Songs, 1939-1945*, «Modern Language Studies», 16 (1986), 1, p. 7.

bre in their life was remembered by Adolf Gawalewicz, former Polish *Muzelman* and witness at the II Frankfurt trial:

An important purpose of the camp songs, little understood - and therefore condemned by Outsiders - was to convert the macabre into the frivolous. This frivolous and even obscene treatment of the macabre realities that undermined the psyche of the prisoner helped to strengthen the prisoner's will, to preserve his psychological stability, and to maintain his will to survive.⁵⁰

Borowski also uses the macabre also to undermine any rhetoric about the lager: he proposes himself as a nihilist⁵¹ blasphemously violating the taboos on extermination,⁵² Borowski's narration oscillates between reliability and unreliability;⁵³ Abramek's gruesome tale about the corpses is followed by an immediate denial: «But is a monstrous lie, a grotesque lie, like the whole camp, like the whole world» [*Auschwitz our home*, WWA, p. 149]. L.L. Langer interpreted this passage as the brutal denunciation of a world where crossing the border between human and inhuman has ceased to be shocking.⁵⁴ Borowski's denunciation of the «monstrous lie, a grotesque lie» abruptly compels us to face the fact that every man in certain conditions may accept to be inhuman. It could be added that, by questioning what he has just reported, the Polish writer invalidates the authoritativeness of the narrator-witness, incapable of reliably portraying the absurd reality surrounding him and contaminating the whole world.⁵⁵ After all, Borowski even “played” with the idea that his fiancée, half-Jewish, could end up in a gas chamber: at the end of *Farewell to Maria* the narrator's voice informs us laconically that she has been gassed in «a notorious concentration camp on the coast» and that «almost certainly with her body» was made soap ([P1, p. 132]: actually, Maria Rundo miraculously survived to the deportation to Birkenau and Ravensbruck, and became Borowski's wife in 1946).⁵⁶

⁵⁰ A. GAWALEWICZ, *Niektóre wnioski wynikające z genezy i funkcji pieśni obozowej* [Some conclusions taken from the genesis and functions of lager songs], typescript, Krakow, 1975, Organization of the Archive Commission Museum in Sachsenhausen, quoted in KULISIEWICZ, *Polish Camp Songs*, *ibid.*

⁵¹ In recent years some scholars have defined Borowski as a nihilist not in order to denigrate him (such as many others in the past), but to place his reflection within contemporary philosophical nihilism (BURYŁA, *Prawda mitu i literatury: o pisarstwie Tadeusza Borowskiego i Leopolda Buczkowskiego*, Universitas, Kraków 2003, pp. 23-69; M. JANUSZKIEWICZ, *Horyzonty nihilizmu. Gombrowicz, Borowski, Różewicz*, U.A.M, Poznań 2009, pp. 183-247).

⁵² I owe these reflections to T. Bocheński, who recalled how «Śmiech w przeciwieństwie do strachu zrównuje wszystkie kulturowe sposoby radzenia sobie ze śmiercią, gdyż wszystkie są iluzoryczne, sztuczne» (Laughter, contrary to fear, affects all cultural ways to manage death, denouncing them as illusory and artificial: Id., *Czarny humor w twórczości Witkacego, Gombrowicza, Schulza. Lata trzydzieste*, Universitas, Kraków 2005, p. 7). The role of irony, the grotesque and the macabre in Borowski see BURYŁA, *Prawda mitu i literatury*, pp. 201-210; Id., *Lager – Literature – Zones of silence...*, p. 76). See also T. SUCHARSKI's observations, *How to describe «the world of colossal absurd»? On the grotesque in Gulag literature*, in *The literature in/after concentration*, p. 88.

⁵³ A. Sandauer spoke of a narrator in “bad faith”, characteristic of certain Polish prose in the aftermath of WW2, who unmasks himself or gets unmasked by the reader (A. SANDAUER, *Sprawa Borowskiego i innych* [1949], in B. KRUPA, *Spór o Borowskiego*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, Poznań 2018, p. 233).

⁵⁴ LANGER, *The Holocaust and the Literary*, p. 90; cf. P. WOLSKI, *Tadeusz Borowski - Primo Levi. Przepisywanie literatury Holocaustu*, IBL, Warszawa 2013, pp. 77-78.

⁵⁵ The quoted closing «But this is not true, and it is grotesque» recalls Polish literature between the two wars and in particular the end of Gombrowicz's *Ferdynand* (1938), in which the narrator makes fun of the reader in a clownish way.

⁵⁶ In Poland such macabre self-mockery was not uncommon: still in 1968, the Polish Jewish writer K. Brandys wrote: «Gentlemen, deign to listen to a guy who narrowly avoided being turned into soap» (Id., *Rynek*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1972, p. 162); cf. TOMCZOK (*Mydło - mięso - opał*, pp. 336-346 and 341-342) who analyzes the (fake) topic of the corpses transformed made into soap.

Pushed to the point of self-harm, self-irony serves to make it clear that the gaze of the witness is not guiltless and therefore not entirely trustworthy. It is no coincidence that the most gruesome reports, which mix horror and absurdity, try to narrate the unspeakable. The closer we get to the gas chambers and crematoriums, the more deformed the view gets: giving emphasis to the narrative, the grotesque allows the contemplation of atrocities,⁵⁷ otherwise too painful.

3. *A narrative beyond the limits*

Borowski belongs to that group of Polish writers who tried to represent the Polish anti-Semitic biases in Nazi occupied Poland: just think of Witek's jokes in *Auschwitz our home* or the indifferent or hostile attitude of some Poles in *Farewell to Maria*. He also showed that certain traits attributed to the Jews by the anti-Semitic vulgate (cynicism, cowardice, the innate tendency to traffic, etc.) have, on the contrary, marked anyone who tried to survive in the lager. In his stories the Jews do not appear as different from others, never hold special positions of power (Becker, who elsewhere was a brutal Lagerälteste, now appears only as a man destroyed by hunger).

An exception is represented by some *Muzelmen*, described with traits that could evoke certain Nazi depictions («their jaws working greedily, like huge human insects» (*This way for the gas*, TWP, p. 35),⁵⁸ but their traits never create an Aryan *countertype*.⁵⁹

I have already mentioned that for Borowski Auschwitz is an inviolable caste-society, passively accepted by almost all the prisoners. Precisely for this reason, albeit assuming the gas chambers as a symbol of barbarism, he does not emphasize so much the Jewish genocide, as the planned extermination of millions of slaves from all over Europe. Borowski avoids depicting national, ethnic or religious groups: the Jews (as well as the Poles) are mostly recognizable by their first name. He also does not distinguish between assimilated and non-assimilated Jews:⁶⁰ Yiddish, one of the major languages of the camp - is never mentioned. Auschwitz becomes the foretaste of a dystopian and slave-like, era, the *World of stone*. The writer explicitly warn us that no survivor may arrogate to himself the right to embody ethical values, and that no narrative about Auschwitz is ever true. Quite different is the condition of those, in the vast majority Jews, who go to death: they appear more conscious and have something to teach us. Borowski portrays them to us in the imminence of death, enlightening them with a humanity or dignity denied to others: the *Zugang* woman who shoots Schillinger, Becker asking to eat before the selection, the guy who stubbornly reads his Bible, the Jew from Lublin who does not want to be separated from the package with his poor things.

Langbein praised Borowski for showing «how human beings can be pushed beyond all limits».⁶¹ Using a similar image, S. Ezrahi DeKoven called him one of the rare writers capable of expanding with «implacable stories the extreme limits of literature» outlined by Kafka, which until then appeared inviolable.⁶²

⁵⁷ On the theories and functions of the grotesque, see M. STEIG, *Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis*, «The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», 29 (1970), 2, pp. 253-260.

⁵⁸ M.H. Ravenna acutely analyzed the zoomorphic representation of Jewish victims: M.H. RAVENNA, *Come pecore al macello? Ebrei nella Shoah e reazioni alla persecuzione*, «Rivista Internazionale di Filosofia e Psicologia», 5 (2014), 1, pp. 102-124.

⁵⁹ The term *countertype* is used by G.L. MOSSE, *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, Oxford University Press, New York 1996: the «counter-typical» narration of the Jews is characteristic of the memories of Zofia Kossak.

⁶⁰ It is worth remembering that not even Nina (the young Jewish woman who lived under a false identity during the war, now bound for Palestine, of Borowski's story *Bitwa pod Grunwaldem* [The Battle of Grunwald, P1, pp. 204-252]), despite her identity anxieties, is explicitly described with clear Jewish features.

⁶¹ LANGBEIN, *People in Auschwitz*, p. 97.

⁶² S. EZRAHI DEKOVEN, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in the Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2008, pp. 51-53.

To this we could add that he pioneered the irreverence, the grotesque and the renunciation of innocence, characteristic of later storytellers (Edgar Hilsenrath) and visual artists of the last decades (such as Zbigniew Libera and Roe Rosen), who have chosen «irony, ambiguity, almost sacrilege» to narrate the Shoah.⁶³

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SUMMARY

Polish writer Tadeusz Borowski (1922-1951) was a political prisoner detained in several Nazi extermination camps (Auschwitz, Natzweiler-Dautmergen, Dachau-Allach) from the spring of 1943 to May 1945. Soon after his liberation, he wrote several tales, short stories and poems, in which he described Warsaw during its ferocious Nazi occupation as well as the day-to-day life in the extermination-camps. Borowski's descriptions of their spaces and functions, which he portrays as a dystopic projection of twentieth century Fordist-capitalist society, set him apart from other Holocaust witnesses and writers. To give the reader a picture of this enormous economic, sociological and psychological experiment, Borowski allows his main character and narrator Tadzio to access the emblematic places of the Auschwitz-Birkenau "metropolis". As a result, even the narrator and the other prisoners appear dystopically shaped by the annihilating system in which they live. My paper analyzes the narrative mechanisms which describe the image of Jews – the Nazi Caste system's pariahs – in the extermination camps.

KEYWORDS: Borowski Tadeusz; Polish Literature; Extermination camps Literature.

⁶³ L. QUERCIOLI MINCER, *Con gli occhi dell'assassino. Ovvero «In Polonia non si è soliti parlare dell'Olocausto con l'ausilio di mattoncini assemblabili»*, «Pl.it / rassegna italiana di argomenti polacchi», 9 (2018), <https://plitonline.it/2018/plit-9-2018-144-162-laura-quercioli> (last accessed June 2020).

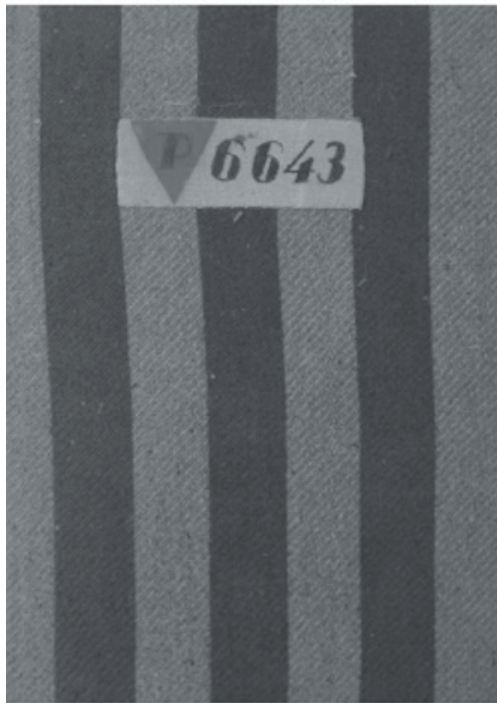


Fig. 19 - One of the covers of the first edition of *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu* (1946).

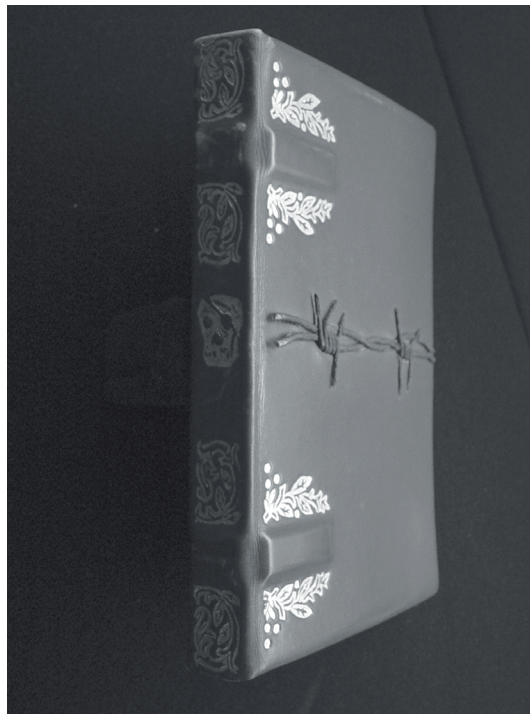


Fig. 20 - Another cover of the first edition of *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu* (*We were in Auschwitz*, Munich 1946), a collection of short stories written by Tadeusz Borowski and other two survivors from Auschwitz, Janusz Nel Siedlecki and Krystyn Olszewski. On the title page, the names of the three authors are preceded by their Auschwitz numbers: 6643, 75,817, 118,198. The book cover's style was pioneering, almost like an artist's book: part of the copies was bound with shreds of the prisoners' uniforms, the red triangle of the politicians and the letter "P" (Pole, the number 6643 belonged to Janusz Nel Siedlecki). Other covers were mounted with scraps of barbed wire (a 2002 exhibit on the work of Girs curated at Yale University displayed two such copies). Another one, owned by the artist and publisher Anatoly Girs, a survivor from Dachau who designed all the covers, was bound with an SS's leather coat.

PART III

ART, BOOKS, MUSIC

