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Report and lament – Zalman Gradowski's notes from Auschwitz

*Z. Gradowski's diary holds great literary value. It was written as if with the future publisher in mind, to extract the manuscript from underneath the ground, bring it to the light of day, and make it available to readers. I begin with this issue, extremely important as the power of that document stems from not only the genuineness of the account, but also from the MODE of reporting...!*¹

The above quoted words were written by Stanisław Wygodzki, a poet, and a former Auschwitz prisoner. The author of the moving collection of poems entitled *Pamiętnik miłości* lost his wife and daughter in a transport to Brzezinka (Birkenau). I am quoting his evaluation of Gradowski's account *W sercu piekła* (*In hare fun gihenomon*) – published in Israel by Chaim Wolnerman – from an article which appeared in the Israeli *Nowiny-Kurier* in 1977. It is a Polish version of the text written in Yiddish included in the above-mentioned publication. Both versions differed only slightly. They provide different names of the writer (Jeheszwa and Stanisław). In both, Wygodzki referred to his own experiences:

For a whole year, I watched the areas of crematorium I and II, from Krankenbau. From that camp, through the wires, from a few metres, you could see people rushed towards the crematoriums. Through the hedge, I could see groups of people **walking**. I could see SS men peering into the chambers upon dropping the poison inside, but also what was happening in the yard, in front of the entrance to the bunker, in the passage from the bunkers to the chambers, near the furnaces, no one could see that. Gradowski saw that...²

The cited, words of a Jewish emigré from Poland place the reader in the middle of a debate on the possibility of representation of the Holocaust experience. What is important is that we are being spoken to by a Jew who survived Shoah. He discussed the possibility of understanding the mechanism of the Holocaust by a camp prisoner, the essence of Gradowski's testimony, and its recipients.

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¹ S. Wygodzki, "W sercu piekła", *Nowiny-Kurier* 1977, issue 157, p. 8. [English version translated from Polish]

² Ibid.

He posed questions about the language in which it was written, and about the place of artistic output in contact with the horror of genocide.

In this article, I shall discuss four editions of Gradowski's notes: *List* and *Dziennik*, which appeared in the special issue of *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie*,³ *Wolny człowieku wiedz, że to jest ogień z piekła...* from the *Pro memoria* bulletin,⁴ and a fragment of *Noc księżycowa* included in a book by Piotr M.A. Cywiński.⁵

Zalman Gradowski was born in Suwałki in 1908 or 1909. He was a pious Jew. After getting married, he settled in Luna. It is a town located near Grodno. Before WWII, he made some literary attempts, yet he did not see any possibility in having any success in the field.⁶ He was engaged in the Zionist movement, and he intended to leave Poland for Palestine in 1940. WWII prevented him from fulfilling his plan. In November 1942, Gradowski together with his family was relocated to the transitional camp in Kalabosin. In December, they were transported to KL Auschwitz, where on 8 December, during the unloading of the train as a result of the selection, he lost his mother, wife, two sisters, his mother-in-law and brother-in-law. They died in the gas chambers. After some time, the Germans forced him, due to his strong physique, to work in the Sonderkommando. There, he was assigned the task of incinerating the corpses in the crematorium.⁷ Shloma Dragon, who in March 1945 indicated where Gradowski's manuscript was buried, recalled that its author maintained a record of transports, a list of gassed people, and in his notes he kept a "complete description of the process of gassing." He also stated that other internees valued highly his documenting work, while he himself, being a functionary, assigned him a bed by the window, so that "he would have more light for writing".⁸ Gradowski was one of the organiser of the Sonderkommando rebellion, which occurred on 7 October 1944. As a result, crematorium IV was destroyed, while SS men killed approximately 450 prisoners.⁹

³ Z. Gradowski, *List, Dziennik*, trans. B. Mark, amended by R. Pytel, in: *Wśród koszmarnej zbrodni. Rękopisy członków Sonderkommando* (2nd special edition of *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie* of 1971). I used the 2nd extended edition of 1972 (Wydawnictwo Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu, pp. 131–133, 133–162).

⁴ Z. Gradowski, *Wolny człowieku...*, pp. 35–44.

⁵ Z. Gradowski, *Noc księżycowa*, trans. Elżbieta Golińska, in: P.M.A. Cywiński, *Zagłada w pamięci więźniów Sonderkommando*, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oświęcim 2015, pp. 69–82.

⁶ I provide bibliographic information after Prof. Bernard Mark. When writing about Gradowski's literary skills, I refer to the post-WWII testimony of Dr. Dawid Sfard. Vide B. Mark, "O rękopisie Załmena Gradowskiego", in: *Wśród koszmarnej zbrodni...*, pp. 128–130.

⁷ Interview with Abraham and Szlama Dragon, in: G. Greif, "...*plakaliśmy bez łez...*". *Relacje byłych więźniów żydowskiego Sonderkommando z Auschwitz*, trans. J. Kapłon, scientific advisory F. Piper, P. Setkiewicz, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Warsaw–Oświęcim 2001, p. 152.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 152–153.

⁹ D. Czech, *Kalendarz wydarzeń w KL Auschwitz*, Wydawnictwo Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu-Brzezince, Oświęcim 1992, pp. 778–779.

On 8 October, Yaakov Freirmark saw the hanged body of Gradowski bearing signs of brutal torture, and a crushed skull.¹⁰

Gradowski's notes offer a testimony of triple nature. First of all, which is their primary function, they document the process of the Holocaust as seen through the eyes of an internee and a member of the Sonderkommando. They include a description of Jewish transports to the camp, and a record of genocide executed in the gas chambers. Auschwitz-Birkenau is, in his account, a place of death, corpses, and human ash. It is a seamlessly operating factory of dead bodies managed through extreme terror. The efficiency of the Nazis is based on the omnipresent killing, and the simultaneous deception of the victims with a chance for survival. The members of the Sonderkommando participate in the project of annihilating over a million people. At that point, his notes reveal another aspect. As indicated by Wygodzki, for the first time ever, we received a psychological portrait of a Sonderkommando prisoner. It is considerably different from the images drawn by Auschwitz prisoners from other kommandos. Wiesław Kielar described them as people devoid of morality: "The Sonderkommando functionaries were no longer people. Stripped of any human feelings, which burnt together with their loved ones, they became impervious to human misery".¹¹ Note that Primo Levi defined them as an extreme example of the grey zone, yet he refused to condemn the members of the kommando: "Therefore, I ask that we meditate on the story of «the crematorium ravens» with pity and rigour, but that the judgement of them be suspended".¹² Gradowski surely was not a typical Sonderkommando functionary. He was a deeply religious person, and a trained humanist. His account is filled with empathy for the victims and other inmates. That deep empathy triggered pathetic words brimming with emotions. That might be, apart from Gradowski's natural abilities, as defined by Nathan Cohen,¹³ the source of the stylistic added value in relation to the purely reporting language which one might expect in an account from a crematorium. The conditions in which the Sonderkommando lived were also significant. They offered a chance to maintain notes, and work on their shape. SS men did not enter the premises where the Sonderkommando lived. Those prisoners did not suffer hunger, nor did they participate in roll calls, which served as a means for selecting weaker prisoners. They did, however, live with an utter certainty of their death in the camp.

One cannot be certain whether all the fragments of Gradowski's notes have survived and been found. Therefore, it is difficult to view them as a work with an intentional layout, particularly because the fragments were published independently

¹⁰ N. Cohen, "«Diaries» of the Sonderkommando", in: *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, Y. Gutman and M. Berenbaum (eds.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1998, p. 523.

¹¹ Wiesław Kielar, *Anus mundi*, introduction M. Kieta, Atut, Wrocław 2004, p. 245.

¹² P. Levi, *Pogrążeni i ocaleni*, trans. S. Kasprzysiak, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Krakow 2007, p. 69. [English version: Levi, P. *The Drowned and the Saved*. London 1986]

¹³ N. Cohen, „Diaries”..., p. 525.

in Poland by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, and Chaim Wolnerman in Israel. In accepting the chronological nature of the record of the events, one must assume that the notes published in *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie* were written first.

I.

The pages found in Auschwitz on 5 March 1945 include a letter addressed to the person who might find it in the future:

“Dear finder, seek everywhere, in every span of ground. Underneath, there are buried dozens of documents, both mine and of other people, which will shed light on everything that occurred here. Many teeth were also buried here”.¹⁴

The quoted fragment also includes information that the notes had previously been hidden in people’s ashes, but they were dug up and relocated because the Germans started the operation of covering the traces of their crimes, and dumping human ashes into the Vistula. They have retained the scent of “not completely incinerated bones and flesh”.¹⁵ The smell, saturating the pages of the notes, is yet another proof of the genocide. The letter includes the author’s conviction that despite good news from the front, he would not live to see the liberation of the camp. He also expressed his hope that a rebellion in the camp would break out: “The day is near, it can happen today or tomorrow. I am writing these words at a moment of the highest peril and excitement”.¹⁶ The time when the record was written corresponds to the time of exterminating Czech and Slovak Jews in the camp, to which *List* also refers. The author was aware of the ethical controversy regarding the attitude of the internees who worked in the Sonderkommando. In the final sentence, he expressed his hope that history would evaluate them justly:

May the future pass a judgement based on my notes, and may the world see in them at least a drop, a bit of the tragic world in which we lived.¹⁷

List is, therefore, an instruction for the finder of the notes, it offers the basic information about the circumstances of writing them, it indicates the intention to document the German crime, it talks about the will to start a rebellion at the camp, and a conviction about the unavoidable death, emphasised by a plea for a just future judgement of the members of the Sonderkommando. That was the other purpose of the diary. It was supposed to offer material for passing a just judgement. It is possible that in that sentence Primo Levi, unlike Stanisław Wygodzki, saw the intention to justify oneself, and did not turn the testimonies dug up from the area of the crematorium into the object of a more extensive consideration.

¹⁴ Z. Gradowski, *List*, p. 132. [English version translated from Polish]

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

II.

The second, longer part of Gradowski's testimony, found on 5 March 1945, was written in the form of a memoir. In *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie* it was assigned the title "Dziennik". Stanisław Wygodzki used those forms interchangeably. In a review in *Nowiny Kurier*, he wrote about Gradowski's memoir, while in *W sercu piekła* – if it was not a result of the translator's intervention – he used the genre name of diary. That terminological inconsistency proved that in the interpretations of Holocaust testimonies, the application of genre-based classifications offers limited usefulness.

The text begins with a dedication to his closest relatives burnt alive in Auschwitz-Birkenau, and a note discussing the historical significance of the record. The account concludes in an explanation:

I wrote this ten months ago. I came from Luna, Grodno district, from the camp in Kalabosin. I buried this in a pit under the ash, I considered it the most obvious place where they will dig around the crematorium. Yet recently [...] ¹⁸

The recollections include the record of the transport from the transitional camp in Kalabosin to KL Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the first days of imprisonment at the biggest of the death camps, and concludes in the author being assigned to the Sonderkommando. One could indicate three directives organising that fragment of Grabowski's testimony. First of all, it includes the convention of an address to an imaginary friend/addressee; it is a recurrent rhetorical device, the aim of which was to move the future reader and evoke her/his emotional engagement.¹⁹ Secondly, the narrative strategy, in which the narrator uses retardation,

¹⁸ Z. Gradowski, *Dziennik*, p. 162. [English version translated from Polish]

¹⁹ At this point, it is worth referring to another text, also found near the crematorium. An unknown Jewish author described in it, in a form of a letter to a friend, the living conditions in the Łódź ghetto. His account (read upon conducting arduous restoration work) was published by Wydawnictwo Łódzkie in 1965 in a book entitled *Szukajcie w popiołach. Papiery znalezione w Oświęcimiu* translated from Yiddish and Hebrew by Szymon Datner, edited by Janusz Gumkowski and Adam Rutkowski. The letter was addressed to an unknown Willy. The publishers argued that the person was invented, while the authors of an Italian publication entitled *Diario dal Ghetto di Łódź* (Rome 1989) were inclined to the opinion that the letters from the Łódź ghetto were address to an actual person. The controversy was discussed by Anna Szwarz Zajac in an article "Willy, przyjaciel prawdziwy czy wymyślony? Rozważania nad polskim i włoskim tłumaczeniem książki «Szukajcie w popiołach»" (*Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 2012, vol. 8, pp. 403–418). The author focussed on the mode of the text's reception by contemporary readers. The Willy present in the letters, real or invented, imposes on a reader the mechanism of identifying with the recipient of the letters, which in her opinion triggers imagination, and determines the literary added value of the discovered document. Is a similar mechanism at play in the case of Gradowski's notes addressed to his friend? Not necessarily, yet one might find there a call for co-testifying through the act of reading.

placing himself in the situation of a person who knows the eventual truth about the fate of the transport, draws one's attention. Within that framing directive, the history of those transported to Auschwitz is filled with a deadly fate. The third directive is a document directive, the purpose of which is to deliver a testimony of the martyrdom and death of thousands of gassed Jews from the Białystok region. The author of the recollections used diverse locations for the narrator: he looks at those rounded up in the wagons from an Olympian, virtually 19th-century realistic narration perspective, only to assume their point of view, being a co-participating narrator, as he was, in fact, a prisoner in that transport. He created or recreated – of that one cannot be certain, and the authenticity criterion is not important in that case – the thoughts of those imprisoned in Auschwitz, the uncertainty, sense of loss, fear, hope, the feelings of family love, and the conviction of men of their responsibility for the fates of women and children. The dialectics of misery, and the calming illusion become the text's framing principle.

In the method of presenting those rounded up in the wagons, one could see a similarity to the film technique: the reader is offered a general view, and camera close-ups onto specific characters. That perception is amplified by the recurring instructions: look, watch, see. At the same time, the presented world is described within the categories of the anti-world, in which human spirituality becomes nullified by hunger, thirst, and beating. They are, in fact, in a death camp, those who survived the selection will be deprived of their own *I*, stripped of all the things that connected them to their former world. In that "island of death", they do not understand the language of other internees, who appear to them as unreal figures. It is a world in which "that which is untearable becomes torn apart", in which "the unreal became real, a fact".²⁰ The final fragments are dominated by a recurring motif of the fear for the fate of one's family. They heard eventually: "They're already in heaven", and "Your families have already been released with the smoke".²¹

The memoir's narrator, due to his knowledge of the fate of the transport, and that of his immediate family, uses variable distance towards the internees referred to in the account. However, it is dominated by the pronoun *we*, which covers the narrator and the rest of the passengers, sometimes even the Jewish nation. That *we* is contrasted with the Germans. The oppressors are described as "barbarians", "despicable ruffians", "cruel beasts", "despicable monsters", for whom Jews are the biggest enemy.²² At the very beginning, the text states that the Jews remain in Satan's web. The narrator also describes the joint prayer of the prisoners, a plea to God for his care: "The melody begs: lead us on a path of life as before. Let us reach our destination, and may everything end with only the fear we have experienced".²³

²⁰ Z. Gradowski, *Dziennik*, p. 149.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

Gradowski's "Dziennik" published in *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie* exceeds the borders of a documentary account of facts, rather being a text of a literary nature. The added value in relation to the hypothetically envisioned text of a purely reporting nature is visible in almost every layer of the account: in the structure, the mode of narration, and the style. That does not mean, however, that it lost its main informational purpose. The route of the train was described in detail, the information about the annihilation of Jews in Treblinka and Auschwitz was conveyed, and the diversity of people's attitudes towards the torments suffered by the Jews was emphasised. What is striking is the sadism of the Germans, and the gesture of slitting the throat mimed by two Christian women when seeing the transport. The entire fragment of Gradowski's *Dziennik* is dominated with a factographic convention which utilises the narrative strategies of realist prose.

III.

Gradowski's other artistic skills are revealed in the fragments of his account published in Israel by Chaim Wolnerman. So far, two fragments translated into Polish have appeared: *Noc księżycowa* and *Wolny człowieku wiedz, że to jest ogień z piekła...* The latter was developed by the editorial board of the *Pro memoria* journal. The Polish versions of the notes in which he described the dramatic events in the history of the Sonderkommando, when in August 1944 the Germans killed two hundred of its members in the main camp of Auschwitz, are still missing.²⁴ *Noc księżycowa* is surely that part of Gradowski's notes which stimulated Wygodzki to inquire about the place of art in such an extreme experience. "An artistic attitude, perfecting the literary text was", the poet suggested, "a form of escape, defence against dehumanisation, and objectification".²⁵ Both fragments share the symbolism of the moon, and a complaint against God. However, *Noc księżycowa* was not inscribed within the chronology of the events, and it could constitute a separate work, with which Gradowski's notes could either begin or conclude. Due to the possible lack of other fragments, his intentions cannot actually be reconstructed.

A fragment of *Wolny człowieku wiedz...* discusses the gassing of five thousand Czech Jewish families, which after being transported from Teresin, lived together in the barracks in Birkenau for almost six months. Gradowski began that part of the notes with an address to "Dear reader", in which he revealed the reason for maintaining them. The recurring addresses to "the future finder", or "the reader", which he included in every part of his notes, were an expression of the fear for

²⁴ The English title is *The Parting*. In the previously quoted article, Cohen wrote that Gradowski hoped that the members of the Sonderkommando aware of their fate would instigate a rebellion. But it did not occur then.

²⁵ S. Wygodzki, *W sercu piekła...*, p. 8.

the fate of records entrusted to the earth, and established their basic function, i.e. a record of the crimes, which exceed human imagination.

Dear reader, in the poems written herein you will find an expression of the suffering and calamity which we, the most miserable children of the world, have experienced in our *life* in the earthly hell known as Brzezinka-Oświęcim. I believe that by now the world knows the name well, yet surely no one will believe what truly happened here. Others think and believe that when someone on the radio talks about the barbarity, cruelty, and the brutality with which people are treated here, it is only *Grueļpropaganda* – and now I want to prove that everything that you have heard, and everything that I will write here is just the tip of what actually happened here. This is a place which has been designated by criminal authorities as the extermination corner specifically for our nation; partly for some other nations, too [...] The aim of my writing is for at least a morsel of that reality to reach the world, and may the world avenge it all.²⁶

That commitment is fulfilled in the fragment. Gradowski described the methods of the crime, the three-day preparations for it, the closing of all the prisoners in the barracks, men and women separately, the deceptions enabling people to fool themselves that a different fate awaited them as they went to be killed in the gas chambers. He described how the members of the Sonderkommando helped lead women and men to the baths. He referred to an invention when he described the stories of married couples rushed to the chambers, and he recreated the thoughts of terrified Jewish men and women. Yet the fiction, serving the purposes of the testimony, indicates, as in a literary report, the truth of despair, fear, horror, as well as the truth of love. This is the fragment from which the words used for the Israeli title of *W sercu piekła* came. This is the view upon opening the door of the gas chamber:

They lie, even though they did not fall, grasping one another, tangled in a ball, as if right before they died the devil himself had been playing some devilish game with them, and organised them that way. Here, there lie two bodies one on the other, there, two sitting by the wall embracing each other. Here, only a part of one's back is sticking out while the head and legs are gone between other corpses, there you can see just a hand, a leg is thrust in the air, the entire body merges into a sea of nudity. On the surface of the world of nudity, you can only see a portion of the bodies of dead people. There are many heads floating in that big naked sea. They remain firmly above the naked waves. It looks as if they were swimming in a big deep sea, and all you could see were their heads. Black, blond, and brown heads are only parts of the body, and only they break the overwhelming nudity.²⁷

Earlier, Gradowski described the behaviour of a crowd of Jews in the baths, the threshold of the gas chamber. Apart from a description of the extreme terror of the victims, and the suffering and pain of being beaten, the account also includes an ecstatic praise of life. Each of the victims was a separate world for

²⁶ Z. Gradowski, "Wolny człowieku wiedz, że to jest ogień z piekła...", *Pro memoria* 2006, issue 25, p. 35. [English version translated from Polish]

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

him. That assumption of Judaism repeated several times is further amplified by the previously mentioned fictional elements used to individualise the portraits of those led to their death. The whole story of the termination of the Czech family camp in Birkenau concludes with the information that on that day five thousand worlds were murdered. The description quoted above presented an example of an extreme objectification of the human body, a pile of naked dead bodies. The metaphor of a sea of bodies may seem some stylistic extravagance, yet it refers to a reader's imagination indicating, on the one hand, the product of the gas chambers, i.e. a uniform pile of naked bodies devoid of any individual features, but on the other, by indicating the different colours of the hair of those murdered, a slight identification of their identities, Gradowski opposed the unifying power of death. That description which employed a metaphor is preceded with a sensation of absolute silence, in which "you could hear an almost inaudible hiss – it was the sound of various fluids leaking from various orifices in the dead bodies. It was the only thing that was moving in that great dead world"²⁸

The image which appeared in front of Gradowski's, and of his future reader's eyes, is one of three he presented to document the procedure of the genocide which occurred in Auschwitz gas chambers. The other two, used to that end by the author of *Czas eksterminacji*, also came from Gradowski's account.²⁹ They described the removal of the corpses from the gas chambers, and the cremation procedure: "The head takes the longest to incinerate. Blue flames peer from the eyes – thus burn eyes with deep cores, while in the mouth the tongue still burns. The whole procedure takes 20 minutes – and the body – the world turned to dust"³⁰

The documentary value of this part of Gradowski's notes, i.e. the description of the extermination of five thousand Czech Jews, is undeniable. The text written in Auschwitz was actually created in "the heart of hell". Note that Gideon Greif, the author of the interviews with the surviving members of the Sonderkommando conducted forty years after WWII, instead of historical commentary quoted entire pages of Gradowski's notes.³¹ It would be difficult to find a more unequivocal confirmation of the significance of the testimony. Obviously, the reliability of an account, as I have already mentioned above, is determined by the circumstances in which it was created, the information it includes, and the person of the witness. The part of Gradowski's notes discussed above, i.e. *Wolny człowieku wiedz, że to jest ogień z piekła...*, enriches the spiritual portrait of their author through the contents of the notes, their language, and their arrangement.³²

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Vide S. Friedländer, *Czas eksterminacji. Nazistowskie Niemcy i Żydzi 1939–1945*, trans. S. Kupisz, A.M. Nowak, K. Masłowski, Prószyński Media, Warsaw 2010, pp. 652–653.

³⁰ Z. Gradowski, *Wolny człowieku...*, p. 43.

³¹ G. Greif, "...plakaliśmy bez łez...", pp. 42–87.

³² I am aware of the fact that my remarks regarding the linguistic shape of Gradowski's notes carry the risk of interpreting a translation.

One should stress Gradowski's deep identification with the Jewish nation. As he worked in the crematoriums by the gas chambers, he knew that the Germans' goal was to annihilate Jews from the entire European continent.

this is a place which was purposefully built and devised to exterminate our nation through gassing, shooting, and butchering, or through fire and torment, sucking the marrow and blood in exhausting work, which is accompanied by beating, until they fall unconscious into deep clay; their dried bodies, as if frozen for ever, stay put,³³

They marched like mourners with their heads hanging low in sorrow. They sent off grief and dejection, which spread onto all the Jews in the camp. Because the path they marched was the path to the crematorium, to the hell of the Jewish nation.³⁴

The identification is also expressed many times by calling the victims his brothers and sisters. The sight of abused and terrified women walking to their death with their children evoked in the chronicler particular outrage, and an explosion of hatred towards Germans, cursed like Haman from the Scriptures. He also expressed twice his will for revenge,³⁵ and a hope for the retaliation the Germans will experience from the free world. Apart from demonising the Germans, the works also include a reducing device, a derisive irony directed against the military strength mustered in the operation against defenceless Jewish families. A significant feature of Gradowski's self-portrait, visible in the fragment being discussed, is his sense of solidarity with the other inmates in the Sonderkommando. The account emphasises the dramatic nature of their experiences. In grammatical terms, the empathy is expressed using the *we* pronoun, which covers the author and his comrades from the death kommando:

The plan was developed with military punctuality. We, the most wretched victims of our nation, were placed in the combat line against our own sisters and brothers. We are supposed to be the first line, onto which the victims will pounce in a camp with their whole families...³⁶

Just to remind you, one of the declared purposes of maintaining the notes was to offer the post-WWII world information based on which it could pass a just judgement on the members of the Sonderkommando. Several times throughout his work Gradowski expressed his hope that the victims would attack their tormentors, and the Sonderkommando would join the rebellion. He also often expressed his disappointment in the fact that such an event did not take place, at the same time discussing the mechanism of terror preventing any spontaneous operations by those led to their death.

³³ Z. Gradowski, *Wolny człowieku...*, p. 36.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁵ It is noteworthy that in the mentioned article, S. Wygodzki emphasised the lack of a will for revenge in Gradowski's notes.

³⁶ Z. Gradowski, *Wolny człowieku...*, p. 37.

In the part of Gradowski's notes being discussed, the factographic narrative is supplemented with reflections of a metaphysical nature. The description of the martyrdom of the Jews was referred to as hell many times, while the horror that was presented there requires one to refer to Dante's work. In Auschwitz, the devil sided with the Germans. Their god proved stronger. It was he who received the sacrifice in the form of the Jewish nation. The descriptions also include heartless cool nature, which undergoes symbolic duplication:

And the moons – there are certainly two. One moon for the nations, gentle love, which offers smiles to the world, and hears the song of joy and happiness. And a moon for our nation. Cruel and brutal, which stands patiently, solidified, and it hears the moans and the screams of the hearts of millions trying to cope with their impending death.³⁷

Through the metaphoric language, the author expressed the radically different situation of the Jews, and the awareness of the Holocaust awaiting the nation. The moon symbolism is multi-faceted. In another fragment, Gradowski saw in the moon a witness to the events which are not governed by the forces of the netherworld: "Sadly, the devil cannot cover the eyes of only the night, the starry sky, and the shining moon. And only they will witness what the devil is doing tonight".³⁸

The murdering of 5,000 Czech Jewish families occurred on the joyful Jewish holiday of Purim, which reminds the Jews that human fate is not governed by chance but by God, who in Biblical times saved the Jews from Haman. Gradowski indicated the Germans' intentionality as they organised the killing during the holiday turning Purim into Tisha B'Av, a day of mourning, on which Jews commemorate according to the Jewish tradition the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, and the destruction of the Second Temple by the Emperor Titus. In the world of the camp and death, Jews were deprived of the sense of the eternal nature of time.

IV.

The final fragment of Gradowski's notes which has been published in Polish is entitled *Noc księżycowa*. It is a text which could co-form the body of the new Bible, which was stipulated by Primo Levi, as its poetic fragment. It is a work of lyrical nature, a lament. It is a lament on the fate of the Jewish nation, and a grievance against Yahweh. The shape of this narrative poem is defined by the dynamics of the recurring questions: why? can you see? what do you feel? addressed at the moon. When highlighting the rhetoric of repetitions, and the presence of apostrophes to nature as a characteristic feature of the notes, David Roskies wrote

³⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

about the tribute Gradowski paid to the Polish Romantic tradition.³⁹ It seems, however, that more important in this case is the complex network of references to the Jewish folk traditions and Biblical texts.

The insistent, often asked question about the cause of the destruction of the Jewish nation builds the tragic and pathetic nature of the work. The speaking persona can be identified with a specific Zalman Gradowski, a member of the Sonderkommando. He remains within a scrap of land where his nation was murdered. The space created in the poem evokes the elements of the landscape of death of Auschwitz-Birkenau. There appear gas chambers and the stacks of the crematoriums, and even the figures of two SS men dropping gas pellets onto the gas chamber-crammed Jews being murdered. The historical time is identifiable, and the political evaluation of the Shoah is formulated as well. In the lament, one can read that the murdering of the Jewish nation was performed in cooperation with other nations, who were rewarded for their complicity. The murderers are clearly identified. Those consisted of the barbarian, though possessing high culture, German nation. That plan of a clear fact, identifiable particularly in the context of the previous fragments of the diary, is overlaid with a metaphysical plan. The German god proved stronger than the God of the Jews. Like the Biblical Molokh, he is paid tribute in the form of the sacrificed men, women, and children. Gradowski wrote many times about the suffering of innocent children, which is a covert polemic with the reading of the Shoah as a punishment for the sins of the nation. In another fragment, he drew an image of the devil strolling the earth; he is the true ruler of the chronicler's contemporary world.

Noc księżycowa can be read without any reference to Jewish traditions. In so doing, one will identify elements of an historical testimony, the expanse of despair of the speaking persona, the pathos of a lament, and the dramatic accusations against God, the world, and humanity. However, what will be left out is the religious dimension of the spiritual form of the author/witness of the Shoah. Therefore, it is important to consider the exceptionally complex symbolism of the moon, to which the member of the Sonderkommando referred. God is the recipient of the despair, even though the author referred directly to a heavenly body. Piotr M.A. Cywiński argued that thus Zalman Gradowski, a religious person, avoided blasphemy.⁴⁰ Nathan Cohen interpreted the moon in a similar manner, i.e. as a substitute for God, though he also considered as plausible a reading in which the utterance was addressed to the Earth's satellite, which shone its icy glare onto a landscape of death. Gradowski wrote:

I feel better in darkness, under the rule of the sad dead night. It resonates the emotions in my heart, and the torments of my soul. The dark night is my friend, cries and scratching are my

³⁹ D. Roskies, "Wartime Victim Writing in Eastern Europe", in: *Literature of the Holocaust*, A. Rosen (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2013, pp. 15–32.

⁴⁰ P.M.A. Cywiński, *Zagłada...*, p. 75, note 67.

song, the fire of the victims is my light, the atmosphere of death is my scent, and hell is my home. Why and what for do you come here, you foreign cruel moon, and disturb people's unawareness of the disaster?⁴¹

The meanings evoked in *Noc księżycowa* become clearer when one refers to Jewish folklore. It seems that Gradowski referred in that lyrical part of his notes to the ritual of Kiddush Levanah, or the sanctification of the moon.⁴² It usually consists of a joint prayer spoken between the third and fifth night from the emergence of the moon, i.e. to the full moon. The participants of the ritual gather in the open air. The prayers are accompanied by reciting of the Psalms, and fragments of the Talmud. The sanctification of the new moon is the hailing of God's presence. Kiddush Levanah is a joyful ritual. The following fragments of the Psalms are recited in the following order: 148, 121, 150, 67, and The Song of Songs. They express the glory of God praised by the heavens, the sun, the moon, man, songsters, and priests. The ritual is a celebration hailing God almighty, justly judging the nations. Psalm 67 includes a request for a blessing, and expresses awe of God's omnipotence. During the ritual, the Kingdom of Israel is compared to the renewing moon. Though it lost its glare, it will return in messianic times, like the full moon. The ritual is concluded (if it gathers ten men – which is why it is celebrated jointly, with neighbours) with reciting the Kaddish followed by dance typical of a wedding ceremony. The ceremony includes an important moment of averting the enemies (they are as far as the moon), and interpreting the reappearance of the moon as a good omen for those uttering the blessing, and the entire Jewish nation.

Noc księżycowa by Zalman Gradowski is a type of a contradiction of Kiddush Levanah. It is a text filled with accusations, negating the power of the moon. The author speaks as the psalmist from the dark of a disaster: "Behold, I am looking at you from my barred hell. I am in the heart of hell, where my nation is dying",⁴³ resembling Job. Yet most of all, he is lonely, his children and his wife were incinerated in the crematorium. The moon appearing in the sky does not offer hope for the restoration of the strength of Israel. The Jewish nation is dying poisoned with gas, it is dying of hunger and thirst in cruel transports. It is a lonely voice, so distant from the notion of the joint celebration of the holiday. In the text, there is a clearly marked

⁴¹ Z. Gradowski, *Noc księżycowa*, trans.

⁴² I based by interpretation of Gradowski's text on the information included in an article by David Zaklinowski, *Sanctification of the Moon. Kiddush Levanah, the blessing on the moon* [online], chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1904288/jewish/Sanctification-of-the-Moon.htm [accessed on 15.05.2016]. I have previously included the fragment where I discuss the ritual of the *Sanctification of the Moon* in a paper entitled *Sacrum i profanum w relacji więźniów Sonderkommando* delivered during a conference entitled *Humanistyczny wiatr od morza. Między sacrum a profanum. Literatura – język – kultura – dydaktyka*, Ustka 2–4 June 2016. The text was published under an incorrect title "Shaul Chasan, więzień Sonderkommando Auschwitz" [in:] *Między sacrum a profanum. Rozważania i dylematy*, G. Różańska (ed.), Słupsk 2017, pp. 169–178.

⁴³ Z. Gradowski, *Noc księżycowa*, p. 78.

division between the happiness of the once familial neighbourly celebrations, and the present emptiness underneath the chilly, derisive, and cruel shine of the Moon. In a series of a dozen or so rhetorical questions, the author accuses the moon of being egoistic, sadistic, and lacking any compassion. Its light mocks the martyrdom of the Jews. He asks why “do you appear here, where the air is filled with death and extermination”,⁴⁴ why do you appear here where “dried shadows” are looking not at your light but at “the fire coming from the high stacks towards the sky”.⁴⁵ “Why do you still shine today with such magnificence and charm?”⁴⁶ It often seems that the author addresses God directly: “The world is worth nothing, humanity is not worthy of using your light!”⁴⁷ In another instance, he presents the crematorium as a sacrificial altar on which the cultured, strong, and energetic nation pays homage to a “devilish god” by murdering “his brothers and sisters from around the world”,⁴⁸ incinerating “completely innocent children”.⁴⁹ The text of *Noc księżycowa* concludes in the expression of a conviction of the total annihilation of the Jewish peoples. Therefore, the author addresses the moon to shine just one single beam onto the victims: “Only you witnessed the disaster, the annihilation of my nation, of my world”.⁵⁰

V.

Gradowski’s account is a voice from the epicentre of the Shoah, it came from the threshold of the gas chamber. It differs from the other five testimonies by the members of the Sonderkommando which were found after WWII near the ruins of the crematoriums, due to its literary value, which was noticed by Wygodzki. Even though the account reached us in fragments, to some extent we can recreate its structural and narrative advantages, and indicate the superimposed organisation of the language of the content. Gradowski was a conscious writer, which is why the literary shape of the notes was not only a result of reproducing his personal language – such a possibility was indicated by Nathan Cohen in the article referenced above.

Gradowski’s notes require one to pose fundamental questions. Is it actually the case that their literary nature obscures the Auschwitz experience?⁵¹ Does the reading

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 73.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 77.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 79.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 81.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 82.

⁵¹ It was a thesis formulated in the famous question by Theodor Adorno whether poetry could still exist after Auschwitz. A radical position was offered in this case by the renowned Holocaust researcher Berel Lang, who favoured the language of facts indicating that poetic language *enters* between the receiver and the Holocaust. Vide B. Lang, “Przedstawienie zła: etyczna treść a literacka forma”, trans. A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Literatura na Świecie* 2004, issue 1–2, pp. 15–63.

empathy achieved through rhetorical devices, narrative techniques, metaphors, and emotional language separate us or does it bring us closer to understanding that extreme experience of the European civilisation?⁵² Is the Muselmann in Primo Levi's and Giorgio Agamben's works the only total witness of the Holocaust? He can only be the silent symbolic figure. It was actually the records maintained by members of the Sonderkommando, including the memoir/diary by Gradowski discussed above, that presented the technical, logistical, and psychological dimension of the genocide committed in the gas chambers. Those texts also place a question mark next to the brilliant and popular term of Dori Laub, of the Holocaust as an event without any witnesses. Let it be reminded that: Laub is a psychotherapist, and his concept formed as a result of his sessions with Shoah survivors, whose minds applied the mechanisms of suppression of the tragic experiences in their biographies.⁵³ And, finally, what determines the significance of the account? It seems that it is mainly the spiritual status of the witness, his placement within the world of the crime, and the very intent to leave a testimony. In the case of the discussed text, its literary shape not only evokes empathy in readers, but it also emphasises its authenticity.⁵⁴ Bear in mind, I am writing about empathy, not readers identifying with the author. It seems that Robert Eaglestone aptly suggested the impossibility of the existence of the latter as a distinct feature of a testimony by a Shoah victim.⁵⁵ Zalman Gradowski was surely one of the major witnesses of the Holocaust, while his account written in some instances as a diary, though from a short time's perspective, not in the least annulled the cognitive value of the narration.⁵⁶

Those texts, dug up from human ashes, hidden in jars and flasks, themselves being a physical fact, constitute somehow secular relics. As I wrote about the literary form of Gradowski's notes, I did not manage to completely overcome the sense of committing a profanation. Today, it might be less intense than if I had considered their literariness some twenty years ago being moved by Wygodzki's article in *Nowiny Kurier*.⁵⁷ It is probably so because the Holocaust has been long

⁵² In an article entitled "Świadectwo śmierci Innego w zapiskach Zalmena Gradowskiego" (*Rocznik Antropologii Historii* 2013, issue 1, p. 249) Marta Zawodny argued that the narrator/observer distance, being an intentional literary device, "increases a reader's distance".

⁵³ D. Laub, "Zdarzenie bez świadka: prawda, świadectwo, oraz ocalenie", trans. Tomasz Łysak, *Teksty Drugie* 2007, issue 5. The fragment comes from a book: S. Felman, D. Laub, *Testimony, Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Routledge, New York–London 1992.

⁵⁴ A similar view on the significance of literary markedness of testimonies was offered by Maria Delaperrière, "Świadectwo jako problem literacki", *Teksty Drugie* 2006, issue 3, pp. 59–70.

⁵⁵ R. Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, p. 38.

⁵⁶ The thesis on the incongruity between narrative forms and the experiences of Shoah was formulated by Barbara Foley, "Fact, Fiction, Fascism. Testimony and Mimesis in Holocaust Narratives", *Comparative Literature* 1982, issue 34, pp. 330–360.

⁵⁷ Exactly twenty years ago the same dilemma pestered Jacek Leociak as he wrote the book now fundamental for the Polish academic discourse on the Holocaust entitled *Tekst wobec Zagłady*.

discussed not only by survivors, and the rich literature of post-memory has helped us become accustomed to figurative narratives. Without diminishing the significance of the latter, we should even more so return to direct witnesses and testimonies—in this case to a testimony created in Auschwitz-Birkenau, a place the name of which has become a synonym of the Holocaust.

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O relacjach z getta warszawskiego, first issued in 1997. Please refer to pages 33–37 of the 2016 Toruń edition. The author assumed a position which I call a moderate one. It consisted of studying the discourse, and, at the same time, focussing on the content, the image of the reality presented therein. In the intentional shaping of the text, he saw a possibility of reaching the author of the testimony as a person. Leociak wrote: “We read a text to, eventually, reach a person, and understand him”, p. 36

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Report and lament – Zalman Gradowski's notes from Auschwitz

(Summary)

The notes by Zalman Gradowski, one of the leaders of the rebellion of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz-Birkenau, are one of the most important Holocaust documents created by its victims right from its epicentre as the crime progressed. Their fragments were published in Poland and Israel. Gradowski was a religious Jew from Grodno. At the camp, he prayed every day, and wrote down details of each transport. His family: mother, wife, and children, were murdered in the gas chambers immediately upon arriving at Auschwitz. The author of the article analysed the literary value of this exceptional document, which consists of diary notes of a narrative nature, and evocative lyrical passages being a discussion with God deeply rooted in Judaic traditions. Thus, one reads an account of the nature of a report and lament. That exceptional – given its place of origin and literary value – record of the crime, and the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust urges one to ask once more about the inexpressibility of Shoah.

Key words: Zalman Gradowski; the Holocaust; Auschwitz-Birkenau; Jews; Sonderkommando; gas chambers; testimony; literariness