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BYSTANDERS SPEAKING. THE LANGUAGE IDENTITY OF THE PEOPLE OF CHEŁMNO IN CLAUDE LANZMANN'S *SHOAH**

Abstract

The main problem discussed in the paper is the authenticity of speech of the inhabitants of Chełmno in the sequence filmed outside the parish church in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. The authors analyze a number of characteristic features of the bystanders' language *vis a vis* the French translation provided by the interpreter Barbara Janicka, and the English subtitles. It is argued that the language of the bystanders carries important information on the speakers' individual and collective identity, and gives clues on the construction of memory, not just on the level of meanings, but also in its materiality. The analysis focuses on four planes which were identified as important for the construction of the implicit messages: semantic ambiguity of the utterances; narrative techniques used by the speakers; verb forms, especially the impersonal use of verbs; and syntax. The specific linguistic traits testify to the fact that the speakers lack adequate tools to verbalize their traumatic memories and to reflect the reality that they were part of. The analysis of the linguistic landscape of the scene also leads to conclusions about the instrumentalization of

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speakers on the part of the film director. The French and English translation in and of the sequence – a summary rather than a rendition – clearly, albeit perhaps not intentionally, contributes to this effect. Through linguistic analysis and wide contextual interpretation, unpacking the way the bystanders speak creates a new, hitherto unacknowledged, source of knowledge on witnessing and trauma.

Keywords: Lanzmann, Shoah, Chełmno on Ner, Holocaust, bystanders, translation

For the real ... is that which exists as a barely conceivable limit of our world and our language; it is pure trauma, the very essence of the traumatic, about which, by its very definition, we cannot – and don't want to – know anything (Bielik-Robson 2004: 34).

Language has been studied quite often in the context of trauma (and) testimony, including the trauma of the Holocaust (cf. e.g. Hartman 1995; Caruth 1995). In the case of testimonies given in multiple languages, the intricate system of interdependencies and paradoxes, discussed for example by Shoshana Felman (Felman 1992), is made yet more complex with additional levels of communication, which call for translation (Kuhiwczak 2007: 61–73).¹ In Claude Lanzmann's monumental, nine-hour documentary film *Shoah*, the interviewees, with whom the director communicates through an interpreter, give their testimonies not only in many languages demanding translation (French, German, Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew), but also in many voices within one language. This intralingual polyphony is best illustrated in group scenes. Among these, the sequence filmed outside the parish church in Chełmno-on-Ner, where Lanzmann set up his interview with members of the local community, is particularly significant: it shows the polyphony within one language, i.e. Polish, as well as the fragmentariness of testimony given in informal and yet carefully planned circumstances.

¹ Kuhiwczak points out that English was not the first language of Holocaust victims or the perpetrators, and yet it has become the space of academic, political and social discourse on this trauma. A certain kind of linguistic colonization of the Holocaust threatens the truth of multi-language testimonies of speech exposed to extreme cruelty and violence. Looking at how translation shapes our understanding of the past, Kuhiwczak analyzes *Lagerszpracha* ("camp speak") and culture texts in which the language of the original cannot be clearly identified.

The first and central task undertaken by our research team, which comprises representatives of Language and Literature Studies, Cultural Studies and Translation Studies, was to prepare a detailed transcript and translation of this film sequence. Due to the dynamics of the communicative situation itself, as well as particular linguistic features in the utterances of the people of Chełmno, this endeavour proved rather challenging, and lead to questions which escape definite answers.

Numerous difficulties emerged already at the initial, technical stage of the work, that is transcribing the voices heard outside the church; not all utterances could be clearly identified, since the inhabitants of Chełmno often interrupt one another, speak over one another, or emotionally respond to one another's utterances. In many instances (especially when the villagers turn away from the camera and start talking among themselves), neither the exact words nor the speakers could be established with certainty. Moreover, it is difficult to distinguish (and mark this distinction in translation) where one speaker's utterance ends and other one's begins. Our aim was to identify individual voices and ascribe them to particular speakers in order to acknowledge their subjectivity, if only in this modest way; we are aware that this cannot be done properly without establishing direct contact with the people of Chełmno, without trying to reach Lanzmann's interviewees themselves or their children.² For the time being, we have considered at least marking each utterance with a miniature portrait of the speaker (generated from the film material). However, technical obstacles in identifying the author of a given utterance made this idea unfeasible. Moreover, they affected the level of synchronicity of entries in the Annex presenting our work (pp. 86–107 in the present volume): even when the text is entered into the table rows at second-by-second intervals, not all voices lend themselves to being ordered.

Difficulties in understanding, analyzing and interpreting the utterances – acts enabling the translation of a given passage – resulted not only from the technical constraints signaled above, vocabulary problems or lack of extratextual information on the reality that the speakers referred to (the latter is discussed by Karolina Kwaśna and Magda Heydel in the present volume, pp. 26–53). Many challenges had to do with the language used by the inhabitants of

² Reminiscences shared by some inhabitants of Chełmno in 1998 can be found in Pawlička-Nowak 2004. In the testimonies ascribed to particular individuals: Zofia Szalek, Sabina Wojtczak, Tadeusz Wojtczak, Stanisława Strykowska and Genowefa Gajewska, one can find linguistic features observed in Lanzmann's interviewees; however, full identifications of the speakers gathered outside the Chełmno church requires further research.

Chełmno-on-Ner and the way they constructed their utterances. The Polish language is spoken here in a rather peculiar context: it is the formal variety learnt at primary school, not used in rural communities on a daily basis, but now suddenly necessitated by the official communicative situation and thus brought back from memory. Careful pronunciation and sentence emphasis suggest that this language variant is unnatural for the speakers. Identifying the situation in which they found themselves as untypical and official, the people of Chełmno switch the language code from their domestic vernacular to the more prestigious standard Polish. However, they do not have full self-control in this respect.

The most spontaneous and emotional elements of their utterances escape the common notion of linguistic “correctness”; they exhibit vernacular features, not only in terms of articulation, but vocabulary, phraseology and syntax. It is worth noting here that, for historical and political reasons, the dialects of the Chełmno area constitute a level of tensions and negotiations. Located in central Poland, the village is geographically close to the Greater Poland region (Wielkopolska), identified with “the West”; since the administrative division of Polish lands under king Bolesław the Great around the year 1000, through the period of feudal fragmentation in mid 12th to early 14th century, to Russian dominance, i.e. a forced shift to the “the East”, from late 18th century till the first world war, it became a dialect borderland, a permanently indistinct area with no clear identification with one particular local dialect (cf. Szczur 2002: 127–131). Specific articulatory features or sub-standard vocabulary may reveal not only individual language habits, but also the speaker’s origin and the history of his or her family’s migration. A competent dialectologist analyzing the utterances of the locals in the sequence outside the Chełmno church will notice language features characteristic of both central Poland and Greater Poland vernaculars (see Czesak in the present volume, pp. 75–107).

Thus, seen from a sociolinguistic perspective, the communicative situation imposed on the inhabitants of Chełmno tested not only their ability to cope with new, unpredictable circumstances (see Papier present volume, pp. 75–107), but also their competence in using the official language code, here: standard Polish. This might explain why among the group gathered outside the church women (usually more diligent at school than men) show more readiness to speak out. There is one woman who contributes to the exchange most often, to the extent that one could even regard her as the spokesperson for the community.

From the very beginning, Claude Lanzmann's conversation with the people of Chełmno is marked by tension related to matters of hierarchy and prestige. The film director casts the villagers in the role of "simple people"; this is achieved for example by arranging them into a group against the backdrop of an "ethnographic set design", that is the church entrance, by camera close-ups on particular faces, and by the soundtrack where religious song is juxtaposed with Szymon Srebrnik's voice, as well as by Lanzmann's way of asking questions (which we will discuss below): sometimes patronizing to the point of caricature, as though he were addressing children, or showing clear bias, suggesting that there is only one correct answer. However, throughout the interview, the inhabitants of Chełmno signal their independence from the foreign director, who has a linguistic, communicative, pragmatic and technological advantage over them; they do so by spontaneously speaking out or talking among each other, sharing private comments. In this way, the villagers, consciously or not, reject the role prepared for them by Lanzmann, i.e. that of interrogatees, whose testimonies he could instrumentally use to support his own thesis. They do not refrain from spontaneous, free comments, often understandable only within their local community; as we try to show, these remarks diverge from the vision imposed by the director. Lost in the official translation (cf. Kwaśna and Heydel in the present volume, pp. 26–53), they were recovered in the transcript prepared by our team.

Preserving the specific features of the bystanders' speech seems as important as restoring the fragments omitted by the interpreter and, consequently, in the English subtitles. The authenticity of this language, which can be used to undermine the credibility of the bystanders' accounts and opinions, at the same time constitutes a significant semantic layer in the complex act of communication taking place before the film viewer's eyes. It is in language, understood as concrete verbal material, rather than a neutral content-carrying medium, that the drama of memory plays out; it is from language that the individual and collective identity emerges; it is in language – in one's own specific language – that bystanders become witnesses (cf. Majewski 2007: 75).

In the present article, we focus on analyzing examples of four linguistic phenomena observable in the utterances of the Chełmno inhabitants, which we believe to reveal and problematize the identity of the bystanders. Translating these words poses a challenge that only seemingly belongs just to the realm of grammar. In fact, translation difficulties touch on the nature of language and memory, and the complexity of their mutual relationship. Thus, in a sense, they testify to the indescribability of traumatic experience,

which always happens too early, existing prior to any narration (por. Bielik-Robson 2004: 28–30).

The first such phenomenon is the equivocality of particular words and phrases used by the villagers. When Lanzmann asks, through the interpreter, what holiday is celebrated that day in Chełmno, several voices answer:

Odpust jest.

Dzisiaj jest odpust.

Niee. Uroczystość Narodzenia Najświętszej Marii Panny.

(Ł)odpust.

Odpust.

The English subtitles render this with two simple but fully grammatical, complete sentences: “The birth of the Virgin Mary. It’s her birthday”. We propose the following translation:

There’s a church fair.

Today there’s a church fair.

No. The celebration of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

A church fair.

A church fair.

Worth saving, even if only in a commentary, is the peculiar articulation of the word *odpust*. This is one of those instances in the film sequence under consideration where spontaneous willingness to speak out overcomes self-control and the imperative of standard Polish. In our transcript, we rendered this labialized, vernacularly articulated Polish word into neutral English, but included a commentary offering our interpretation of this linguistic phenomenon, presented below.

The dynamic and colloquial utterances of the Chełmno locals are marked by numerous repetitions; redundant from the point of view of message content, they nevertheless constitute an important element of the communicative situation. The above-quoted utterance is a response to a conversational question from the film director, who, preparing ground for the interview, uses phatic elements of communication to win the villagers’ trust and establish a certain degree of rapport using. In this context, the word *odpust*, repeated in different variants and accompanied by an explanation of the official, religious nature of the event, may be interpreted as testifying to the Chełmno inhabitants setting their own position as friendly informers, who at the same time show a kind of indulgent understanding for Lanzmann’s ignorance. In

the light of how the conversation subsequently unfolds, what is important here is the plurality of voices confirming the individual villagers' agreement to enter into the exchange and adopt a shared starting point. However, the group is not unanimous or unison.

Our English version preserves the repetition, and the additional commentary accounts for the ambiguity of the noun *odpust*, which in Polish means both "indulgence" and "church fair". The people of Chełmno use it in the latter sense, to mean a celebration held in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is the patron saint of the local parish – an important event in the life of the community, combined with a procession and a fair. However, the former sense of the word is worth bearing in mind: in the Catholic Church, "indulgence" means remission of temporal punishment for committed sins. Participating in church celebrations is to guarantee the elimination of punishments for sins forgiven during confession. Indulgence is accorded to "the faithful Christian who is duly disposed (...) under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1471). Contained in the Polish word, this meaning does not surface in the French translation provided by Lanzmann's interpreter Barbara Janicka (so the film director remains unaware of this telling albeit undeliberate ambiguity of *odpust*), nor in the English version. Yet in the context of whole sequence outside the Chełmno church, it has an enormous interpretive potential. "Today there's a church fair/indulgence/*odpust*" could mean "Today in Chełmno, punishment for the committed sins is remitted". Undoubtedly imperceptible to both the villagers themselves and to Lanzmann, from our perspective this is an ironic and very powerful introduction into a conversation about the genocide that took place during the war before their eyes. Within this interpretive framework, the sequence outside the church could be treated as an instance of collective (general) confession, in which the director would become a priest confessor, unaware of his role. On the other hand, given Lanzmann's attitude while visiting Chełmno and shooting this film³, it would be difficult to tell whether his questions should awaken the consciences of the bystanders, or rather constitute a form of manipulation and/or manifestation of his advantage.

³ For more on Lanzmann's declared attitude towards Poles and the Polish reception of his films, particularly *Shoah*, see Głowacka 2016: 297–298 and Bojarska 2010.

It is also worth noting another interesting aspect of the opening of the sequence outside the church. The time and place chosen by the film crew to conduct the interview with the inhabitants of Chelmino seem extremely unnatural. Suddenly, people participating in devotions are placed in an unforeseen situation of doubled extraordinariness: the holiday, an occasion unusual in itself, is now unexpectedly disturbed. After a moment of consternation, following the Polish folk tradition of hospitable politeness, and perhaps also with a certain degree of curiosity, they take up the conversation with a Western filmmaker.

Another vivid example of speech characteristics creating meaning is a longer utterance by a female speaker, in response to Lanzmann's question about the mood of the young Szymon Srebrnik, then a fourteen-year old boy in chains. The Polish interpreter rendered the question as "Był smutny czy wesoly?" [Was he sad or happy/joyful/merry?]. This simple, even puerile way of opening a new topic is followed by the woman's extensive mini-narrative, incorporating dialogues remembered from the past, but also additionally complemented with comments addressed directly to Szymon Srebrnik, which remain unnoticed by the interpreter. In the context of the reply, the question strikes us as all the more patronizing and inappropriate in relation to the boy's situation or traumatic memories. The woman offers the following account of her feelings about Srebrnik and of talking about him with a German soldier:

Smutny był. **Nawet** ja go podziwiałam, **mówię**: "takie dziecko", **mówię**, "trzymacie", do tego **mówię** "**Laabs** puśćcie go", **do tego** Niemca.
A on **mówi** "**wo**"?, *że gdzie, a ja mówię*, „do ojca do matki”. A on **mówi**: "niedługo pójdzie do ojca, do matki", **a on pokazał, o tu, w niebo palcem mi pokazał.**

In the French translation and English subtitles, this passage is shortened and, typically for Lanzmann's interpreter, rendered in the third person singular, without reproducing the original "I" and the point of view represented by first-person narration (cf. Heydel 2018: 269-271; Tipton 2008: 12):

BJ: Même madame... Alors, quand elle a vu cet enfant, elle a dit à l'Allemand : « Ecoutez ! Laissez cet enfant partir » Alors, il m'a demandé : « Mais où? » « Chez son père et chez sa mère » Alors il a regardé le ciel, et il a dit : À bientôt! Il ira là. Cher père et la mère.

CL: L'Allemand a dit cela?

BJ: Oui.

Even the lady
 when she saw that child
 she told the German “Let that child go!”
 He asked her, “Where to?” “To his father and mother.”
 Looking at the sky, he said: “He’ll soon go to them.”

Immediately noticeable in the Polish woman’s original utterance are repetitions (the word *mówię*, “I say”) and a particular way of presenting direct speech. This passage is in fact a dramatic scene playing out before the listeners’ eyes; the narrator plays both parts, presenting a dialogue, with lines introduced in a very simple, repetitive way (*mówię/a on mówi/a ja mówię/a on mówi*, “I say/and he says/and I say/and he says”). She acts it out using intonation and gestures. She gives her account of the particular lines the way she remembers them or the way they actualize in her memory in the moment of telling. The German insertion *wo?* gives us a peek into the structure of interlingual communication in the occupied Chełmno: the exchange, at least partly (in one direction), took place in the German language. Also relevant is its incorrectness; the correct form here would be *wohin*.

What is most important in this scene, however, is the construction of wartime interpersonal relations. A Polish woman living in the occupied village is talking to a German man from the occupying forces about a young Jew, who does not even have the status of a human being; he is treated as dehumanized labour force.⁴ Yet it is precisely the boy’s humanity that is the subject of the exchange; the speaker shows compassion for his unbearable

⁴ Szymon Srebrnik stayed in the Litzmannstadt ghetto until March 1944. One day he was arrested in a round-up and brought to the market square in Bałuty district, then taken to Chełmno to serve on the *Hauskommando*. His job was to throw from a boat into the river Ner the remains of bones that did not burn down completely in the Kulmhof camp. Before the arrival of the Soviet troops, the Nazis set out to kill all prisoners. The boy was shot, but he survived. After staying in Red Army hospitals in Dąbie and Koło, he convalesced in Chełmno with the Miszczak family. He briefly returned to Łódź, but in the end he decided to leave Poland. Waiting in a kibbutz in Milan to leave for Israel, in 1947 he met Hava; they married to years later and settled in Ness Ziona. In the 1950s, Srebrnik worked in construction industry; later he found employment as an electrician in a weapons factory and with time got promoted to a manager. He was a witness in the Eichmann trial, as well as in Bonn. In mid 1970s he returned to Chełmno; it was then that Claude Lanzmann recorded his memories. Srebrnik retired in early 1990. He died in 2006 as the last Kulmhof camp survivor, leaving his wife, two daughters, five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren (cf. Montague 2012: 220).

toil and appeals for his freedom, which is followed by the suggestion that “setting free” would let him reunite with his parents.

It is worth noting how the people of Chełmno treat Szymon Srebrnik in the film sequence, and in particular how they refer to him. They are describing someone who was familiar, even close. This is suggested by both their use of the diminutive form of his name and by non-verbal elements of their utterances. *Pan Szymek*, “Mr Szymek” evokes associations with the typical way of refereeing not only to children, but also to local “village characters”, but above all it shows a certain familiarity, while at the same time trying to take into account the passage of time: *Szymek* has become “Mr” *Szymek*). The relationship between the inhabitants of Chełmno and Szymon Srebrnik seems stronger than one that would result only from sharing a particular space for a period of time. One can get this impression for example looking at the considerable ease with which individual villagers engage with Srebrnik outside the main thread of conversation with the film director.

At the same time, analyzing the utterances of the people of Chełmno, one feels that they are still talking about a child. The woman describes him, recreating a scene from the past, and her narrative staging justifies shifting the point of view back in time, but one should note that the majority of speakers describe an adult man, the survivor present among them outside the church; not only grammatical tenses, but also times are shuffled here. Traumatic memories were ingrained in child speak, as the woman talking to Lanzmann in mid-1970s was a girl at the time of the events (it is difficult to establish her age with certainty, but she seems a bit older than Srebrnik). It was before a girl’s eyes that the recounted scene took place; perhaps it is easier to return to it now precisely thanks to the interpreter’s childlike question: “Was he sad or happy?”. Paradoxically, since the woman was too young to name and thus to understand what was happening to Szymon Srebrnik, this unfitting, “innocent” question takes her and her listeners back into the past, to her personal biography.

In her utterance, the woman mentions that she felt what she calls *podziw*, a sense of wonder/marvel/admiration, although perhaps we should rather associate it with sympathy or concern for the boy’s fate. Admiration or marvel/wonder may refer to how brave the parentless child had to be to endure inhumane conditions. Through her statement, the speaker communicates emotions evoked by the situation she witnessed; suddenly, as though changing the subject, she transports herself and her listener back to the narrated moment, positioning herself in the role of someone who turns compassion

for Szymon Srebrnik into action. Her exchange with the German, which she not only recounts but even enacts, means speaking up; in the 1940s, it was an intervention, an act, an attempt to alleviate Srebrnik's situation. We cannot be sure whether this event actually took place, or it is a projection or fiction, or a retelling of a story heard from someone else.

Constant repetitions of *mówię*, "I say", are not merely a signal of the speaker's sociolect; in first-person narration, this practice is used primarily to confirm the credibility of the citation.

The verb positions the speaking subject inside the events, in the middle of the reported scene, and its repeated use is to reassure the listener that he or she is hearing the story from an eyewitness. In this sense, the phrase is a guarantee of truthfulness. Here, it is repeated so often that in fact it may raise suspicion as to the credibility of the account and the division of roles; its effect would be thus opposite to the intended one. Inserted into the sentence now and again, "I say" may also serve the phatic function, filling the time needed to activate the next thought or mask nervousness. The speaker tries to add to her credibility also in another way: when the interpreter interrupts the story to tell Lanzmann what she has heard, the woman adds a few more sentences – the ending of the scene – directly addressing Srebrnik, who seems to confirm her version with a smile and nod. This part of the exchange is hardly audible; it is impossible to tell exactly what the woman is saying; one of the interpretations suggests that the boy said the woman in Polish: "Ah... he's stupid" (in response to the German's suggestion that the boy "will go to his father, to mother"); thus recounted, the woman's memory brings smiles to the faces of the people gathered in front of the church.

This last fragment is not included in the translation. The narrative scene is radically simplified and ordered. The interpreter's rendering is limited almost exclusively to the content of the recounted dialogue, with only minimal narrative framing; the speaker's strong presence in the enacted scene is reduced through elimination of the repetitions and the use of more detached third-person narration. The latter appears to be Janicka's strategy, defying the standards of interpreting; perhaps she is thus trying to secure herself the minimum comfort of retaining her individual subjectivity (Heydel 2018: 299–271).

Whether the scene reflected reality or was a fabrication, in its space, in the speaker's language, with all its idiosyncrasies, the work of memory played out, presenting *dramatis personae*, and thus demonstrating the relations between the perpetrator, the victim and the bystander. A reductive

translation strips the latter of subjectivity; from her voice it takes away the authenticity of a participant, and from her account – the tension resulting from direct participation. Preparing our own translation, we strove to preserve the multidimensional specifics of this communicative situation:

He was sad. I even wondered [marvelled] at him. So I say: “Such a child”, I say, “you have there”, I say “Laabs⁵, let him go” to that German. And he says: “wo”, [so:] “where”. And I say “to his father, his mother”, and he says “Soon enough he’ll be going to his father his mother” and he pointed up there, he pointed with his finger at the sky.

Rather than bringing the original utterance closer to the English reader, in our view using a non-standard dialect of English in our translation would only further obscure an already complicated situation and trigger undesirable connotations. Thus, we settled for the most neutral English language possible, while keeping it close to the syntactic and rhetorical structure of the original utterance, even at the price of a certain degree of unnaturalness: some grammatical structures are rather unusual for standard English, especially in terms of word order and verb forms. The narrative scene discussed here highlights another difficulty in the interpretation (and thus also translation) of a film work: it clearly shows that the “dialogue list” is not independent of the other levels of the film: image and sound. It is only by juxtaposing the textual layer with the speakers’ pace and manner of speaking, intonation, movements, gestures, etc. that one can produce a coherent portrait of a bystander, in this case: the woman recounting the story. This example, as one of many in the film, is a particularly good illustration of the need for contextual cultural commentary, which would complement the translation of the bystanders’ utterances.

Another important linguistic phenomenon, which requires attention due to both the translation difficulties and the ethical questions it entails, are verb forms used by the speakers in describing events relating to the extermination of the Jewish population. These grammatical forms have a peculiar effect on how the relationship between the subject and the object of a particular activity is constructed in the sentence; they often also concern the narrator and his or her position in relation to the events, thus influencing other linguistic choices in the utterance. Impersonal verb forms ending in *-no*, *-to* appear

⁵ She probably has in mind *Hauptscharführer* Gustav Laabs, the driver of the gas van, who came to Chelmno from Berlin in April or May 1942 (cf. Montague 2012: 201).

with striking frequency; the same holds true for the noun *człowiek* [man/human] used in the sentence to mean “everyone” (as in the English generic “one”/ “you”) and thus at the same time also “I”, and the passive voice, as well as constructions with the pronoun *to* (“it”) denoting a collective. The bystanders reach for these forms especially often when reporting how the Germans imprisoned and killed the Jews in Chełmno during the war.

Examples of impersonal verb forms include: “**Nie było** to planu”, “Dzień i noc **było wożone**”, “A tam to nago... **Spalano**”. Each of these phrases requires a detailed grammatical analysis, which would exceed the scope of this article; what they have in common is the erasure of the subject-object relationship at the level of sentence structure, so that it is no longer necessary to link concrete persons to particular actions. Impersonal forms both depersonalize the victim (which would mean that the bystanders adopt the language of the perpetrators) and leave the perpetrators nameless; such constructions might give the speakers the (illusory) comfort of not formulating accusations for which they would have to take responsibility. We need to bear in mind that these forms are usually absent from colloquial Polish; they are hardly to be found especially in rural dialects, which are often perceived as primitive. Thus, they can be interpreted here as imitating the official discourse perpetuated in the society. Everybody knows who transported and burnt the Jews, but the speakers do not want to verbalize this, perhaps for fear of consequences, out of caution, or because they want to avoid calling things by their names. Consequently, actions get detached from the agents, as though happening of their own accord, independently. The utterance shapes the course of the process. Looking at this phenomenon from a slightly different perspective, although fear is still the central affect here, one could say that indicating the perpetrators, assigning the atrocities to specific individuals or groups, is a kind of taboo, instinctively avoided by the people who recount those horrific events. This strategy is euphemistic in nature: it does not quite conceal the perpetrators, but rather helps to mitigate the message that people are capable of committing such crimes.

The odd but understandable phrase “Dzień i noc było wożone” should probably be construed as a non-standard equivalent of the impersonal “dzień i noc wożone”, combined with passive voice. On the surface, this form might be interpreted as having an anti-Semitic undertone, if one were to regard the implied subject of the sentence as referring to Holocaust victims: “[to] było wożone”, “[it] was transported/driven” (in Polish, the grammatical number and gender of the subject can be inferred from the verb, so sentences without

a noun/pronoun in the subject position are fully grammatical); a similar example is: “A tam to nago spalano”. However, this interpretation defies the intuitive logic of language use. The grammatical detachment evident in these structures disturbs the reader probably due to their inseparability from the tragic extralingual context. In any case, these phrases were omitted in the official English subtitles.

Disturbing and seemingly ambiguous are also utterances featuring grammatical structures suggesting the speakers’ linguistic detachment not from the Germans, but from the Jews. Examples include the sentences “**Placz był**” and “**Bo to było zamknięte, wszystko głodne było**” – metonymic, but referring to human subjects – which connote perhaps not so much detachment as the New Testament vision of hell. The second part of the utterance uses the impersonal collective pronoun *wszystko* [everything/all] as the subject to describe the situation of the people locked up in the Chełmno church. Janicka’s French version and the official subtitles eliminate the detachment with neutral sentences:

Ils gémissaient, ils avaient faim.

The Jews moaned, they were hungry. They were shut in and starved.

The original sentences do not feature the Polish word for “Jews”; however, it is clear that the indicative pronoun *to* [it/this] logically refers to people. Its use profiles the imprisoned Jews not as individuals, but as a mass of creatures. This grammatical construction usually refers to living beings (including people) in distress, suffering. Such a sentence could describe the situation of children in a poor homestead, or unfed, neglected farm animals. From the perspective of standard Polish, it would be difficult to regard this form as a sign of respect for the victims or awareness of the pathos of their terrible death. In fact, however, it does express the speaker’s pity, concern, and a sense of helplessness. Belonging to rural language, this sentence invokes the peasant experience of scarcity; it can be interpreted as a way of expressing compassion and pity on the part of someone who has no power of agency.

Working on our translation, we prioritized preserving the clumsiness of the villagers’ utterances, the foreignness resulting from their divergence from the norms of standard language, the numerous repetitions, and above all the impersonal verb forms, whose further nuanced, ambiguous, and “singular” examples can be found elsewhere in the sequence, and which were very challenging to render in English. One such case is a sentence

absent in the French version and the English subtitles, “Nie było to planu”, which we translated as “There was no plan there”. We thought it important to include this memory, which is based on intuition, conjecture or knowledge acquired by the bystanders. In our translation, we wanted to avoid defining who had no plan, so as to emphasize, albeit in a non-standard way, the idea of continued search, in which the reader can also take part, confronted with several alternative versions. In the following examples, we have left more than one proposed translation to indicate possible (necessary?) interpretive directions. Here we list them to illustrate our strategy; everyone one of them calls for a separate, in-depth analysis, which we cannot afford within the limits of this essay.

Dzień i noc było wożone.

Day and night there was the carrying.

Day and night there was the moving.

Day and night there were transports.

Day and night there were transported.

Each of these versions has different implications; it is only at first glance that they seem almost the same. Differences in the choice of verb and its grammatical form highlight various nuances of motion: “the carrying” implies less independence or agency on the part of the “objects” of transport than “the moving”. Regardless of the interpretation, we wanted to show that this utterance is noun-based and unusual, and avoid “they” in the subject position, as it was absent from the grammatically sub-standard original.

A similar case is another bystander’s reference to the spontaneously indicated place where the Jews were exterminated.

A tam to nago... Spalano

And there... naked... Burnt.

And there... naked... Was being burnt.

Here, the passive voice in English is to imitate the original impersonal verb form *spalano*, which is a poignant attempt at trying to grasp in language a reality that is unimaginable. Our uncertainty as to the appropriate grammatical tense illustrates the difficulty in choosing between the sparseness and conciseness of the message and on the one hand, and precision on the other. It is a dilemma not easy to resolve in face of the events in question: the process of burning the bodies of murdered victims.

In response to Lanzmann's question whether the inhabitants of Chełmno heard cries coming from the church at night, one woman says: "No pewno, że tak. Płacz był", which we decided to translate as: "Sure there were. There was crying...". Not included in English subtitles, this passage testifies to the speakers' instantaneous reaction, their certainty, and, again, the work of memory, which then evokes several other gruesome images and remembered sounds.

Nawet jęczeli tak z głodu, tak.../ Bo to było zamknięte, wszystko głodne było.

They were even moaning with hunger so... / Locked up all that was.... Hungry.
They were even moaning with hunger so.../Because all that was locked up.
They were even moaning with hunger so.../**All locked up, all hungry.**

We resorted to multiple versions again, with translations oscillating between sparsity of the message and its clarity/precision. We used the passive voice, naming the object (*patiens*) of the activity rather than the agent (*agens*), and we worked with the word order.

The use of all these impersonal forms, inviting the identification of hidden sentence subjects, becomes even more interesting when compared to other utterances of the Chełmno locals, which feature the noun *człowiek* [man/human, "one"]. Replying to the question whether they were allowed to look in the direction of the church where the Jews were locked up, one woman says: "Jak człowiek szedł szosą, to jak ino spojrział tutaj, to już dostał..." (in our translation: "When you walked along the road, it was enough to take a look and right then you got...", see below). Although it is common in Polish to use the word *człowiek* as a reference to a person appearing in the narrative or a kind of a generalised subject (like the English *one* or *you*, or the German *man*), the word contrasts here with the impersonal way of referring to Jews, especially with the pronoun *to*. Set against this background, *człowiek* resounds very strongly. It introduces narrative subjectivization, and at the same time detachment: someone talks about herself once walking the road, but instead of speaking in the first person, she refers to herself in the third person as *człowiek*. Consequently, the present speaking I is clearly separated from the acting I of the past, and at the same time that acting I is extended to include the broadest possible category of human subjects: anyone who walked along the road and looked was risking sanctions. The speaker places herself in the depicted scene, and at the same time she indicates that she is outside it; she sees herself as in a mirror or in film. *Człowiek*, one – this can be me, but it could be anyone who

has such a memory, anyone who walked that road. This grammatical narrative structure leads to generalization; it presents a binding rule.

Let us note that this is an entirely different kind of generalization than the one reducing a particular group of people and their individual fates to the pronoun *to*. In this context, using the word *człowiek* could suggest a distinction in the bystanders' awareness and memory: in the world they describe, they, Lanzmann's interlocutors, narrators, had a different status than the Jews. Nowhere in the sequence are Jews referred to as "those people", e.g. in a phrase like "those people were hungry". The word *człowiek* appears here next to, if not in opposition to the word, *Żyd*, "Jew", which does come up in the utterances.

The English subtitles render the above sentence as: "Even going by on the road, you couldn't look there", so that it loses the ambiguity. In our version, "When you walked along the road, it was enough to take a look and right then you got...", we tried to retain the threat lurking in the broken ending, underscored in Polish by the use of the verb *dostał* (from *dostać*, "to get", also "to get a beating") and emphatic particles: standard Polish *już* (already/right) and vernacular *ino* (only/just). This broken utterance also illustrates the social hierarchy in wartime Chełmno. The Poles ranked higher than the Jews; they still retained their subjectivity and individuality, and the right to walk around the village, but on condition that they comply with the regulations imposed by the occupier. One of the rules was that looking at the violence against the Jews is forbidden, under threat of physical punishment⁶:

Other translation difficulties that emerged already during our work on the first passage from the sequence concerned grammatical forms considered incorrect in Polish: using singular to refer to plural entities, and the above-mentioned structures with the pronoun *to*, resulting in dehumanizing collectivization. The pronoun *to* can also have different, more verb-like functions in the sentence. The syntax of: "bo to różna narodowość była" (tentative translation: "'cause it was a different nationality, that") shows communicative clumsiness when the speaker is confronted with standard Polish and tries to use terms outside his or her everyday vocabulary. In the phrase "żandarmy stojeli", in turn, the incorrect non-masculine plural of *żandarm* ("gendarme"); the correct plural is *żandarmi*) in combination with

⁶ This is confirmed in numerous statements from the inhabitants of Chełmno and surrounding villages (cf. Pawlicka-Nowak 2004: 48–49).

the uncontracted, vernacular verb form of *stać* (to stand; the correct past plural is *stali*) is typical of Greater Poland dialects.

All these linguistic characteristics may be interpreted as triggered by the speakers' nervousness, for example resulting from their failed attempts at controlling their memory, or from the ambition to make a good impression and come across as well-informed and thus useful, or by other factors or motivations. Regardless of their causes, these quirks construct a linguistic portrait of the speakers, signifying their unconscious beliefs, as well as emotions affecting them both in the moment of speaking and in the narrated scenes evoked from memory

A major translation difficulty was also the speakers' syntax. They mostly produce short, simple sentences; when longer ones are attempted, their construction is usually faulty. The utterances feature inversion, with conjunctions placed at the end of the sentence ("Dzisiaj pada deszcz, dlatego" – "It's raining today, that's why") and unfinished utterances, pauses suggesting the speaker's failed attempt at finding the right words ("Ładnie odpowiadaj, bo..." – "Answer nicely, or else"; "Oni wywozili, ale..." – "They drove them away, but..."). The speakers often insert short words for extra emphasis; these refer to familiar elements of reality or underscore the dynamics of the utterance. They include, for example, the emphatic particles *tu* ("I nam wszystko tu opowiedział" – "And he told us everything") and *no* ("Tak, no to tak już było mówione" – "Yes, that's already been said"), the adjectival pronouns *taki/taka/takie* ("Auta żelazne były takie" – "Such iron cars", "No był pomost taki zrobiony" – "Well, such platform was made", "drabinka tam taka..." – "Such little ladder there...") or indicative pronouns *ten/ta/to* ("Tam były walizki gdzie te łokinka ze złotym" – "There were suitcases where the windows with gold...", "Do tego, do pałacu" – "to that... to the palace") and *tam* ("Tak, bo tam byłam na tej..." – "Yes, because I was there at that..."). The villagers hesitate when choosing vocabulary to describe specific elements: the platform, the cars (instead of *ciężarówki*, vans). Translation difficulties concern not only individual sentences, but also the overall structure of the utterances – often broken mid-sentence, incomplete, usually composed of very short phrases, sighs, or even single words. Constructed impromptu, the utterances do not always follow a logical structure; they are sometimes chaotic, redundant, self-referential.

While having a considerable potential for interpretation in the context of trauma, as noted by Dorota Głowacka (Głowacka 2016: 302–306), these features of the language of the Chełmno locals are at the same time characteristic

of people who are not used to speaking in public, or even to building any longer texts. Linguistic signs of trauma overlap here with class and social markers, and peasant language reveals both its power of imaging and its own limitations.

The Poles interviewed (or perhaps rather interrogated) by Lanzmann use a particular kind of the Polish language, although perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it is the Polish language that, at least to some extent, uses them, exposing their difficulties in naming and describing the events which they had seen and remembered. Despite the villagers' considerable degree of independence from the interviewer exerting his power over them, language reveals their vulnerability with regard to wartime memories. They do not have an adequate language to name the events they are trying to describe, and thus to fully distance themselves from them. Addressed to the film director, who was probably the first to ask them questions requiring public speaking in front of the camera, who pursued his inquiries, probed the speakers, and to some extent instrumentalized their testimonies (Głowacka 2016: 303–304), at the linguistic level the statements of the Chełmno parishioners constitute narratives put together from images of memory, stagings of the evoked situations, reminiscences of previous testimonies⁷; thus, they reveal their potentially literary character and the work of memory. Lanzmann, however, did not care about the stories and biographies of particular people, nor about individual voices, but only the events they recounted. When he heard what he wanted to hear, he would interrupt the speaker. (In the analyzed sequence, immediately following the spontaneous account of the woman who “interceding” on behalf of Szymon Srebrnik, Lanzmann interrupts her story through the interpreter and completely changes the topic. His question: “Ils se souviennent quand les Juifs étaient enfermés dans cette église?” is addressed by the interpreter to the group gathered outside church: “Czy pamiętają Państwo jak tutaj Żydzi w kościele byli zamknięci?” – “Do you [polite, plural] remember how the Jews were locked in the church here?”). In a sense, Lanzmann's ally in his treatment of the accounts of the Polish

⁷ “[In 1945] Jakub Waldman began collecting testimonies from local villagers (...) On June 6, 1945, the Polish Ministry of Justice appointed Judge Władysław Bednarz to conduct an official investigation of the former camp. He set to work immediately collecting evidence and taking testimonies from people in the area who witnessed the activities of the *Sonderkommando* as well as from the survivors (...). In 1946, Judge Bednarz published his findings about the camp in a 74-page book, *Obóz straceń w Chełmnie nad Nerem* [The Death Camp in Chełmno-on-Ner] (Montague 2012: 176–177, 285).

bystanders who witnessed the Shoah in Chelmno is Barbara Janicka's inevitably hasty interpretation into French, and the constraints construction of the existing audiovisual translation into English, i.e. the summarizing and standardizing subtitles.

Our analysis has not been aimed at attributing good will to the bystanders or to justify them; above all, we wanted to give them (back) a voice, to show how they speak and what speaks through them, to reveal the work of memory, self-creation and emotions contained in their statements, and thus to demonstrate the complexity and multidimensionality of this material. A close analysis of the linguistic features of interviewee statements, i.e. characteristics which are completely lost in translation, and were essentially also inaccessible to the director, complicates the interpretation of the bystanders' attitudes, opening new areas of reflection. There is no doubt that a meticulous recreation of the specifics of the bystanders' speech in a new English version of the film text, with additional explanatory comments, will contribute to the difficult research in this area, which clearly proves at every stage that one should not venture definitive declarations. Reconstructing the emergence of bystander statements by analysing and interpreting the workings of language is a valuable and yet unexplored source of knowledge on what the act of testifying does to the subconscious, the dynamics of memory, and the "unearthing" of memories. As noted by Shoshana Felman,

To testify is thus not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others: to *take responsibility* – in speech, for history or for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal, in having general (nonpersonal) validity and consequences (Felman 1992: 204).

The project of (re)translating the voices of the bystanders in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* has revealed not only lexical and aesthetic dilemmas, but above all ethical ones. It requires looking beyond the language(s), into the biography of individual speakers; this will constitute further stages of our research. One should bear in mind that Lanzmann's film premiered at a time when a proper debate about *Shoah* (or the Shoah) was not possible in Poland. We hope that our project will make the recovered voices heard and it will contribute to resuming a discussion on neglected topics.

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