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## **“Positive” and “negative” interpretation of the testimonies of the Holocaust. A few notes about perception**

It is difficult to write about the Holocaust of the Jews in the context of positive places of remembrance, after all, the entire topology of the Holocaust refers to this specific glossary, in which there is no room for anything optimistic, the naive ‘happy end’ never occurred there. There is annihilation, destruction, erasure of memory and a dispute over its shapes. Auschwitz, as the central paradigm for the experience of the twentieth century, does not make naive Enlightenment narrative that understands what is lived by the community, as a helpful key in designing educational programs that guarantee to prevent disasters in the future. Auschwitz proves that history is not and never will be a teacher of the future. Even if a guarantee is not what is necessarily sought here (this is always too strong of an argument), it is the study of the Holocaust that translates into practice of individual choices, is not however, a particularly made up for lesson by the peoples of Europe. These are, of course, truisms usually ending in naive (perhaps the only credible) ascertainment that the political and social systems are not able to protect society from what scholars of genocide (Leo Kuper, Daniel Chirot Benjamin Valentino et al.) have called „human nature” in its biological-Darwinian-species exemplification of the pursuit of domination. Shoshana Felman in the introduction of her considerations about the education crisis, poses important questions for teachers and educators: „Is there a connection between the crisis and the basic tasks of education? Or to put the same question even more boldly and more clearly, can we talk about the relationship between trauma and pedagogy? Does the post-traumatic age, which survived unimaginable historical catastrophe, taught us – or should teach us - something we still do not know about education? Should trauma be a teacher of pedagogy and would pedagogy be able to explain the mystery of traumatic experiences? Should the teaching process take into account medical knowledge; and finally, can medical practice benefit from the experience of educators?”<sup>338</sup> The answers to the above questions - during a seminar conducted by Felman with students from Yale, where professor confronted students with certificates of the Holocaust in order to obtain from them an emotional response - go beyond the expected criticism of the

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<sup>338</sup> S. Felman, *Nauczanie i kryzys albo meandry edukacji*, „Literatura na świecie”, no. 1-2/2004, p. 343.

inadequacy of their personal experience. For Felman, even a substitute for empathy is a triumph of educational projects. On the surface, little, not enough. The reaction of the students however, satisfied the researcher because she is aware of the distant past and the change in sensitivity, which is part of society of *infotainment*.

Felman's assertion is obvious - every sphere of social perceptions about a particular historical fact has its positive obverse, carrying the message through which, continually build upon and consolidating belief still present in the educational system, that knowledge of the past is the key to preventing tragic socio-political developments. A controversial thesis, but redefined by Felman who, treating the analyzed cultural texts (novel, poem, film) as contributions to a kind of psychodrama, to which she subjected his seminar participants. In her concept of teaching, testimony is not a closed historical text, but becomes living matter - is even included in the personal life narratives of participants: „What at the beginning was conceived as a theory of testimony, suddenly was incorporated into practice, ceased to have anything in common with theory, and turned out to be a fragment of life which is indelible and permanently afflicting necessity of teaching - education almost never having an end”<sup>339</sup>. The students were fixed by the professor in the experience, whose framework has been significantly expanded with a personal narrative, cultural texts have been implemented and incorporated into the „I” participants, and then subsequently confronted with their life experience. Psychoanalytic method of interpretation (Felman often uses psychoanalytic structural instruments), and in particular projection video-testimonies of survivors led the seminar group to experience a profound crisis of disintegration - hardly definable by the students themselves, and then - just like in the classic psychotherapeutic process - thanks to Felman as a therapist, beat the crisis of „working through “and describing her thoughts to the class. This act of giving testimony allowed it to become part of the group, which included all actual seminar participants along with literary or historical figures, creating one cohesive and integrated „Commentating Me”.

Felman's experiment is a perfect illustration of the role of testimony in the education process regarding the most traumatic historical events. And a good example of using the historical narrative - even the most distant from the experience of the group in the educational process, which enriches it and provides the tools for the identification of victims on a unknown and unequaled up until now level. It is a quality encounter much more valuable than solely consisting of empathic or experiencing sentimental stories of survivors. It is also a much longer lasting experience - unlimited in duration within the timeframe of the session / reading of the text, and is the most ambitious form of pedagogy, which Felman calls „education having no end”. Meeting with survivors usually has a fixed narrative. Meetings of this kind organized at the Centre for Holocaust Studies and the Student Scientific Circles “Memento” constitute a kind of theatrical performance, taking the form of a very solemn academy, where, on one side, there are witnesses - like actors ancient drama speaking their extremely

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<sup>339</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 398.

lofty issues, and students who participate in this the mystery of the past in which they cannot participate. The experience of the witnesses is clearly closed to them - they can rely only on their imagination, emotional and social competence and individual sensitivity. To a lesser extent, on their family history and historical knowledge, which creates objectified, 'truth', which does not always correspond with an individual testimony. Often it becomes a barrier and validates or subconsciously creates a distance towards the testimony. For Felman, such meetings would be fuller, more mature, would allow a group of listeners to debate and talk about their feelings. This seemingly small, yet significant suggestion is to look for value fixation experience. Opening up not only to the testimony, but also to the polyphony of experiences and reflections created by the group.

A truism is a thesis which stipulates that the testimonies of the Holocaust have increased educational value. That places of memories memorials are extremely important weapons in shaping positive socially expected attitudes which co-create civil society. However, these assertions cannot be based on an uncritical acceptance of all educational activities which incorporate testimonies. Let us consider several examples of some educational and artistic activities, which seem to be identical - but, in my opinion, are fundamentally different not only in their objective and method, but also the authenticity of the experience. There is for example a kind of control group of high school students who study my specialty: knowledge about the Holocaust and totalitarianism. The group was not too large, but had cognitive competencies and a critical approach to the majority of pop cultural discourse on the Holocaust.

## The Counted

In 2012, the Israeli director Dan Doron made a film documentary entitled *Numbered*, whose main characters are camp numbers of former prisoners (Jewish and non-Jewish) of Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Doron invites them to participate in the controversial project, where they would talk about their experiences, in front of a camera, related to the tattooed number. The protagonists were marked by numbers, and their fate after the war is subsequently followed, from the perspective of the postwar Israel. Some memories are funny, but most of are extremely traumatic. Survivors „share” their tattoos with their descendants - a young Israeli woman tattoos wearing the same number that bears on the shoulder of her grandmother, a young Israeli duplicates her uncle's number on her hands. In the final scene of the documentary, a quite ambiguous *grande finale* takes place: in the atelier all the heroes of the documentary are gathered; generation of survivors and young Israelis who share a tattooed number. This scene should be interpreted in two ways; at the level of a psychological trauma inheritance is a symbolic gesture of solidarity with those who survived, taking on part of the burden of the past by the younger generation. This empathetic kitsch does not exhaust the readability of the documentary, which exemplifies the historical policy of the State of Israel on the Holocaust, and which, as

noticed by an insightful monographist of the phenomenon - Edith Zertel, is used by the state: „Auschwitz - the incarnation of absolute evil - is mentioned whenever the Israeli society faces a problem for which it is not prepared, which cannot solve nor face. In this way Israel has turned into an ahistorical and apolitical tombstone, where Extermination ceased to be an event of the past, and has become a point of reference, the present and a handy ideology”<sup>340</sup>. Instrumentalization of the Holocaust took place in several stages. From the rejection of the discourse of survivors to the apology of suffering. We will not dissect this phenomenon, which has endured to see few major monographies on the subject, but the Israeli film director is a perfect example of something that I would call „controllable pedagogy”, in which historical policy is the main leaven of traumatized viewers.

### The Story of Ruth Bondy

One of the heroines of the film *Doron* is Ruth Bondy (number 72430). Ruth Bondy is a renowned journalist, translator from Czech into Hebrew. She was born in Czechoslovakia in a wealthy, assimilated Jewish family with strong Zionist orientation. Most of her large family was killed during the war; father-Joseph in 1945 in Dachau, mother-Frantzi died of sepsis in Theresienstadt in 1942. In her youth she belonged to a Zionist youth organization *Noar Ziyyni Lohem*. When she arrived in Israel, because of her tattooed number, she had to answer the frequently asked question: How did she survive? - „I saw hesitation in their eyes when asked - maybe she was a whore? Maybe she was Kapo?”<sup>341</sup>. Ruth Bondy decided to have surgery to remove the tattoo. In the Israeli film director’s movie a dramatic ambiguous procedure exists, which calls into question the sincere intentions of the director. The director tries to put pressure on her interviewee, the questions are becoming more brutal and blunt. The woman’s initial resistance is broken and she is experiencing extremely strong emotions which are used in the film. The next generation of Israelis figuratively inherits the trauma tattooing one of the major stigmata of the victims. However, this is not so much a mechanical appropriation of experience, mindless absorption of memory, but also an example of extremely unfortunate meeting with the testimony. The final scene to collect survivors and generations of young Israelis, shows all the folly and emptiness of similar experiments. For what is a tattoo visible on the hands of the survivors? It is a sign of the past. And with this we agree. What is its mirror image tattooed on the forearms of the Israelis? Only simulacrum. Naked fetish. Perhaps a hipster downfall. This experience will never be mutually shared nor identical. This is not in any way a real meeting. I showed this film to the students and they had similarly mixed feelings. They were not offended by the very idea of a physical transformation, the transfer of numbers, but thoughtless comments, full of optimism and pride in the project. When I asked

<sup>340</sup> I. Zertel, *Naród i śmierć. Zagłada w dyskursie i polityce Izraela*, Kraków: Universitas 2010, p. 16.

<sup>341</sup> *Numbered* (Dana Doron, Uriel Sinai, 2012).

whether they resented the duplication of the Prisoner Numbers, they felt no discomfort. It was a clear signal that this generation is not sensitive to topological characters of the Holocaust, some of their „sacrilization” and individuality, but more disturbing was the exterior of survival, focusing solely on participation in the project and an act of courage, which for them was their consent to get tattooed.

## Incredulity

Pawel Lozinski's (1991) *Place of Birth (Miejsce urodzenia)* is only seemingly a reconstruction of the events of nearly fifty years. The director invites Henryk Grynberg, after all these years of his March events to return from the US to his native village, and confront his childhood memory. He found the answer to the question, what happened with his father and brother that gloomy summer of 1942. This at first innocently *sentimental voyage* gains *magnum*, transforming itself in to a Greek tragedy when the mystery is solved - Grynberg's father was murdered by their Polish neighbors, because he gave them cattle for safekeeping, for which they were not going to pay him. Grynberg defeats on his journey Lete - one of the rivers of Hades. This is a river of forgetfulness, through which the dead cross over, forgetting their earthly life. And finally, in extremely shocking final scene in the film, he finds the place indicated by the peasants, where he discovers the remains of his father. He takes to his skull and handles it like Hamlet, looking at the eye sockets filled with mud. This extremely intense emotionally scene, full of metaphors, becomes proof that the apparent recording of a documentary can have the power of Greek tragedy. The image is located in the heart of the ethical problem, which is the image's truth as it exists beyond the narrative and especially beyond words, which are the domain of literature. Our imagination does not stop with Lozinski's film only as a reconstruction of facts that could be summed up in just a few words, but rather with the images: the faces of witnesses, barely uttering the words, muddy roads and a Polish, poor village of early nineties, and the face of Grynberg, who again becomes a scared, Jewish child, who, along with his father, mother and brother wandered among their Polish, once close neighbors in search of shelter. But this apparent setback, „the position of the child”, which the writer adopts is only overwhelmed with strong emotions in the scene where he is digging out the grave of his father. Lozinski's film is a rare example of a director's ability to capture a moment (in the work of documentary such moments are extremely valuable), which is an authentic *pointe*, an extremely strong dramaturgy. Lozinski with Grynberg did not expect such an ending. I have repeatedly shown Lozinski's movie, always arousing extreme emotions. From complete identification, to cool, participating distance and to rejection. The most skeptical group was a group of second year graduate students who passed most of the courses on the Holocaust and intensely deepened their knowledge in seminars and visits to memorial sites. The group blamed the outstanding director of emotionally manipulating the viewer, illegal intrusion into an area of extremely intimate experience in the scene, when the writer raises the mud

filled skull of a murdered father with visible fracture of the occipital bone (sustained from a blow). Part of the group did not believe in the possibility of an accidental discovery of the tomb of his father. When I informed the group that there are foundations whose purpose is to search for similar graves in Polish villages, groves and forests, and that often these searches end in a tragic success, in the end, it did nothing to dispel their doubts. They considered the film inappropriate and incorporating a cheap effect. They rejected the widely accepted, scopophilic need to participate in the macabre and they directed their attention towards one of the supporting characters, Polish heroines of the film that pointed to the real perpetrators of Grynberg’s father murder. This older woman, too weak to stand up, and bedridden - having nothing to lose - dared to identify the perpetrators, about who knew the whole village, but who jointly and severally refused to answer questions posed by Grynberg: Who killed him? The declined emotional involvement strategy of the group was dumbfounding. Most of the texts and testimonies of the Holocaust narratives are based on emotions involving the viewer. Sometimes the weakness of the realization of these testimonies are compensated by extreme aesthetics. But for this group of students the most important was a sincere attitude, the old woman’s decency, and her need to tell the truth.

The groups’ behavior prompted me to reflect on the absence of excitement in the reception of texts and testimonies, whose recipients are a more demanding group of recipients, equipped with analytical instruments and having a much higher than average competence and knowledge of ontological contexts. Interesting and very valuable are reflections of Hannah Arendt, published in a classic essay *On Violence*: „The absence of emotion does neither cause, nor stimulate rationality. >> Indifference and peace of mind in the face >> << of unbearable tragedy << sometimes can be really scary << >>, namely when there are not resulting from mastery, but an obvious manifestation of misunderstanding. To respond intelligently, you must first of all be << >> astir and emotional opposite is not rational << >>, whatever that meant, but either inability to yield to emotion, which is usually a pathological phenomenon, or sentimentality, which is a perversion of feeling. Rage and anger become irrational only when they drive against a substitute”<sup>342</sup>. Thus, the emotional potential is not an obstacle, but certain epistemological competencies. Substitute will not replace a real encounter. Substitute projects are similar to the movie *Doron*, which are programmed for survival and inheritance trauma. This falsehood is felt by the recipients of countless pseudo-testimonies, which in its narrative have established strategies of working through the trauma.

### **Once again. A meeting, nonetheless**

This intentional falsehood founded by the creators of such documentaries, whose patron is simulated writing of Wilkomirski, abolished by narratives seemingly simple and naive. A perfect example is the story of the discovery of Irena Sendler. The

<sup>342</sup> H. Arendt, *O przemocy. Nieposuszeństwo obywatelskie*, Warszawa: Fundacja Aletheia 1999, p. 82.

word 'discovery' is ironic, but the irony contains a bitter grain of truth. One of the biggest heroines who saved Jews, obtained the status of an international icon thanks to the help of teenagers from Kansas. The history of the discovery of Sendler as a historical figure is known and documented<sup>343</sup>. Megan Stewart, Elizabeth Cambers and Sabrina Coons were average teenagers faced with typical problems for their age: problems in school, parents' divorce, some unfortunate first loves. I met an extraordinary person whose bravery was unquestioned. What could combine three teenagers from the poorest regions in America alone living with a woman whose life was an illustration of the thesis that, when institutions fall, people become fragile and only a few find the strength to oppose wickedness? Without a doubt the testimony of Irena Sendler was this genuine encounter, which says Felman, and which so shocked described by her group of seminar participants. In which, the rights of some difficult definable coherence conjoined immature teenage experience with great history. And when from this anastomosis a new experience was formed, then as teachers we gain confidence of persistence, and that it will be one of the azimuths, small or big ethical choices taken in the future. It is the deepest sense of the meeting with the witness of the Holocaust. Of course it would be naive to remain in the belief that we gain some confidence, that we obtain a guarantee of a certain moral attitude. But if we are convinced that the meeting with the Holocaust witness will raise in the future, any doubt when making difficult decisions and choices, if you force them to reflect – this is already the educators' success.

I cited examples which are not particularly representative, nor do they constitute any wider representation. They are the result of my experience and position as sometimes participatory witness or moderator of the discussion. I cited examples, however, in a significant way point to the correct trajectory of such educational workshops at a time, when the biggest arguments (personal narratives of survivors) will become a thing of the past, when they are only fractional registrations and narratives. There will then be a need to recall some paradigms operating on the rights of the authority. I hope that the described positive examples of practices of meeting with the witnesses of the Holocaust will become a regular practice – still alive and, despite the passage of time, still an inspirational part of human history.

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<sup>343</sup> J. Mayer, *Życie w stoiku. Ocalenie Ireny Sendler*, Warszawa: AMF Plus Group 2013.