

STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY HISTORY 7

Piotr Filipkowski

Oral History and the War

The Nazi Concentration Camp Experience
in a Biographical-Narrative Perspective



PETER LANG

Piotr Filipkowski

Oral History and the War

This book is rooted in the author's experience as an interviewer and researcher in the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project – the biggest European oral history project devoted to a single Nazi concentration camp system, realized in the years 2002/2003 at the University of Vienna. Over 850 Mauthausen survivors have been recorded worldwide, more than 160 of them in Poland, and over 30 by the author.

The work offers an in-depth analysis of Polish survivors' accounts, sensitive to both, form and content of these stories, as well as their social and cultural framing. The analysis is accompanied by an interpretation of (Polish) camp experiences in a broader biographical and historical perspective. The book is an interpretive journey from camp experiences, through the survivors' memories, to narratives recalling them – and backwards.

The Author

Piotr Filipkowski is a sociologist and oral historian, who works as a researcher at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. He is co-founder of the biggest Polish Oral History Archive at the History Meeting House in Warsaw. He currently publishes mainly on oral history theory and practice, as well as on qualitative methods in social sciences.

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Introduction

World War II is part of the past. It forms an increasingly distant sequence of events on the axis of measurable physical time. The memory of this war – the memory of its experience – belongs, in turn, to the present. Incessantly remembered and (re) interpreted, it continues to be profoundly vivid in the present. It remains an important, sometimes crucial, point of reference for a number of identities: the European identity that is under construction; the more soundly-constructed national identities; and, moreover, for a number of individual identities. There is a number of such memories of the experience of the war; similarly, there are many communities of memory comprised of different people who remember different things, or remember things in diverse ways. These memories tend to be mutually contradictory, conflicting, or competitive. This is nothing new, in terms of how memory works in general – and, it is not specific to World War II.

Nonetheless, there *is* something specific about the era in which we live as regards the memory of wartime experiences. The last eyewitnesses – those who had first-hand experience of World War II and who are able to tell us themselves about this experience – are passing away. They had often recounted pieces of this experience, when they had the opportunity to be listened to. But, they were not listened to everywhere and in all periods; indeed, some were not listened to at all. Today, however, there is much more of a willingness to hear them and the last of the living witnesses continue to tell their stories. For them, the war, with its extreme ordeals – the Holocaust, the concentration camps – forms part of their biographical experience: usually, the most special, central part of it, which is constitutive for their self-image, their self-definition. This element, even if concealed and denied, is also the key ‘episode’ in their autobiographical narratives.

Soon, these people will no longer be counted among the living, although their memoirs, accounts, stories and recorded interviews will remain. The archives of their memory and identity will survive. Many of these collections, such as the narrations that are known as oral history, have been created in recent years, inspired by the conviction that they are being produced at the very last moment, when it is almost too late. The archives containing the successful collection of recordings of thousands of individual voices and images are also a token of the culture of memory – or rather, the culture of remembering and commemorating – in which we live. These archives are often referred to as unique monuments, of a particular kind. This label is both meaningful and revealing. The same is true for the claim that we are witnessing the experiences of the war as they slip from communicable into cultural memory, the latter being produced without a direct reliance on the autobiographical memory of the ‘witnesses’.

Although the records of this autobiographical memory, which have been deposited in the archives, seem somehow to suspend or delay this moment, they cannot reverse it. The authors of these testimonies will never speak for themselves

again. They will need to be exposed, read, reheard, watched – and, subsequently, interpreted, dressed with a sense, and given meanings that are relevant. This will from henceforth take place in the absence of their authors/narrators/‘witnesses’ – and at an increasing distance from them, in biographical, temporal, emotional, and identity terms.

This moment, which can be described as a passage of memory, strikes me as being particularly important. This book is a clear testament to this, and is itself marked by it. It is founded upon biographical accounts of ‘witnesses’ – former prisoners of Nazi concentration camps. I have listened to, and recorded, the greater part of these stories myself. The remaining ones were taped in the same period and all the recordings were eventually stored in the archive, where they were made available for further research and subsequent, different interpretations. The stories have remained, whilst most of my Interviewees are now dead. I can remember the meetings with them well, and my memory of these encounters is also recorded herein, alongside their own autobiographical memory. Subsequent commentators, should there be any, will be free of my personal experience of these meetings. By re-reading/rehearing/watching these accounts, they might thus see more, and see it more emphatically. Yet, for the very same reason, they may remain blind to certain aspects of importance to me.

There is yet another instance of the slide – or shift – of memory, of which this book is a token. Although strictly connected with the aforementioned phenomenon, it is specific to and very much embedded in the local Polish context. After all, the concentration camp experience was recounted in Poland long ago – narrated, in the first place, by surviving inmates. It was they who wrote memoirs, submitted testimonies and reported on their experiences. And, it was they, primarily, who wrote historical studies and contributed to the development of sites of memory in former camp locations. They also formed an important group that, to a significant extent, helped shaped what is known today in Poland as history-based politics. This group was also, incidentally, one the most prone to political manipulation. One method by which this was done was through the construction of a narrative of the *Lager* (as the camps were known in German) experience that excluded the annihilation of Jews. Although Holocaust victims were taken into account when it came to calculating the statistics of victims, this was done in such a way that, while remaining silent about the uniqueness of the Jewish experience in the camps, it allowed for its dilution among the ‘millions of victims of various nationalities’, with Poles at the fore.

Today, those distortions are fortunately, at least to a considerable degree, part of the history of the collective memory (and collective oblivion). The Holocaust experience has since been clearly articulated, reported and recounted. Moreover, this has been done not only by the few remaining survivors, although many of them have told their stories and also as part of oral history projects. A further contribution has been made by those who interpret their stories, including younger scholars using a contemporary language. Long denied, marginalised, and falsified, the story of the extermination of the Jews is today beginning to take on a distinct, comprehensible, and attainable shape – to those, naturally, who are willing to hear it.

Meanwhile, the story of the non-Jewish, other-than-Holocaust camp-related experience – of concentration camps, rather than extermination camps, to use the symbolic and simplified, but important, differentiation – remains an ‘old narrative’, one that dates back to ‘those years’, namely the early years of the post-war period. This story, once told by political prisoners, was set within a different culture of memory. It is rather awkward to listen to today and the language those narrators were accustomed to is now little understood. It all seems rather well known, exhausted in scholarly terms, unattractive in terms of research, or out of fashion. Hence, few are willing to contemplate this particular camp experience, even briefly. Even fewer are prepared to try and retell it anew, using a more contemporary and, perhaps, more comprehensible language.

The starting point for this present study is, therefore, my own involvement as an interviewer for the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project (MSDP) and other oral history projects. I emphasise this point in order to highlight two important aspects.

First, the central point of reference in all my analyses are the meetings held with former *Lager* inmates and their autobiographical stories, which I listened to (and, subsequently, read the transcripts, reheard the sound recordings, watched the video recordings). These meetings and stories come before any analysis. Therefore, I endeavour, to the extent that I am capable, to acknowledge and respect the subjectivity of my Interviewees, and their ability to interpret and give sense and meaning to their own experiences. Any of my own interpretations, with similarities and differences acknowledged and generalisations constructed, are built upon those primary interpretations, as referred to in the quoted fragments of the accounts.

Second, all the accounts I have analysed (including those whose authors I have never met in person but which were recorded instead by my colleagues) have been audio- or video-recorded, the copies being kept in the archives of the KARTA Centre and the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Austria. Some are also held by the Institute of History and Biography in Lüdenscheid, Germany. Copies of almost all these recordings can also be found in the personal archives of my Interviewees (or, more and more frequently, of members of their families). In all these locations, the recordings are identifiable under the narrators’ real names, to which they consented in writing. They also agreed that their accounts, whether as extracts or in whole, may be used in scholarly and educational work. Why do I mention this? Because I wish to emphasise the specific nature of the ‘qualitative data’ I analyse. Contrary to the usual practice of social researchers and many oral historians, I cite my Interviewees under their full personal details. My point is that it is legitimate in this case; what is more, it emphasises the subjectivity of the individuals researched. I mention the archiving procedure as a reminder that these accounts are not my property: once put in the archive, they are made available to other scholars and researchers, open to further readings and interpretations,

including those done from completely different research perspectives – within the confines of sociology, and beyond. Even beyond the limits of the social sciences.

A number of oral history projects, and all those I have participated in and contributed to, are of a documentary, rather than a research, nature. Yet, they remain open to research, and encourage further research; in particular, qualitative research.

My reading of the narrative autobiographical interviews with former prisoners may be classed as a qualitative analysis of content. Such analysis refers to several research perspectives, none of which I approach in a dogmatic fashion, while I shun a completely consistent application of the recommendations of any of them. My main inspirations are rooted in two sources. The first is the biographical sociology of Norman Denzin and Fritz Schütze. In particular, I take advantage of Schütze's concept of trajectory, as one of the main biographical processes. The others is theoretical reflexion as part of the oral history concept, especially in 'the most sociological' concept of oral history, as represented, for example, by Michael Frisch, Paul Thompson, Daniel Bertaux and, especially, Michael Pollak, an author virtually unknown in Poland. With the oral autobiographies under analysis, I pose the questions of what is recounted, and how is it recounted. Thus, I refer to the known distinction proposed by Ingeborg Helling: *biography as a means* versus *biography as a topic*, whilst not espousing either option in this polarity. Rather, I attempt to combine both of these approaches.

I am interested in the experience of my Interviewees' time in the concentration camp, as seen through their autobiographical accounts, the (hi)stories of their lives. My assumption is that the only access we have to their camp experiences of 'there and then' is (inter)mediated by the narrative here-and-now. Yet, the latter is not a simple representation of the bygone; on the contrary, it becomes embroiled in multiple contexts of social relevance, such as (but not only): the context of individual and collective/group memory; the context of identity; defining the interview situation by those questioned (and by the researcher himself/herself); and, the very course of the interaction. In analysing the autobiographical situations of former inmates, I attempt to recognise these contexts. Thus, the core of this study is based on attentive reading, listening and watching of the stories told by my Interviewees.

The book is structured into three sections. The first section covers theoretical (as well as practical) contexts of relevance to my core research work, which I have grouped into two chapters.

The first chapter briefly explains the tradition of oral history through its European and American developments, tracing its relationship to qualitative sociology. I note a Polish specificity: a strong memoirist tradition on the one hand, against a very weak current of typical oral history research and studies on the other. The latter observation is true also for the experience of war, the key biographical experience researchable in this manner. I discuss the major documentary projects carried out within this trend over recent years, with a special focus on

the venture I have participated in, the aforementioned MSDP, with the interviews done in this context forming the basis of most of my further empirical analyses.

Chapter 1 can be read as a separate text, independent of the study as a whole. It had, in fact, been published as such, in a slightly different version, before the Polish edition of this book appeared¹. When read in the context of the whole book, however, I consider it a fairly good introduction to the detailed analyses that later unfold. It forms a framework for them, a substantive point of anchoring and reference.

The following chapter, still within the first section, is an essay on the current state of *Lager* research in the Polish social sciences. Aside from the discussion of the relevant studies, I have attempted to clearly define my own research perspective, against the background of, and in critical reference to, the existing approaches. There, obviously, are elements of positive inspiration, not necessarily Polish, among which in-depth analyses of concrete, single autobiographical interviews occupy a significant position. These are, simultaneously, important studies in the social sciences pursued in close association with historical research.

I attempt such an analysis in the second section of this study. Chapter 3 discusses my reading (including audio and visual records) of the over thirty biographical interviews I have recorded with former inmates of the Mauthausen concentration camp. My analysis extends to selected interviews, amounting to over twenty, recorded by my colleagues as part of the same documentation project. This is a kind of ‘crosswise’ reading, a form of cross-analysis. I endeavour here to identify what is common, shared, and characteristic to almost all the stories of the former prisoners, as well as what is distinctive to just some of them, which can be grouped together. The recognisable similarities and differences led me to the construction of a peculiar typology of camp narratives and experiences. I discern three types of *Lager* experience, although my focus is not on ‘pure’ experiences but their processed autobiographical and narrative versions, access to which was given to me by their narrators. These processed narrative experiences are not free but strictly correlated with memory – and, through memory, with experience. This approach is close to phenomenological takes and Gestalt psychology; in the field of biographical sociology, it has perhaps been most fully described by Gabriele Rosenthal.

These three types of experience consist of: (i) stories of long-term prisoners, most of whom were pre-war intellectuals, with considerable seniority as inmates. They spent almost the entire war in the *Lager*, became most familiarised with the rules of the camp universe, best assimilated them, and best cognised (and experienced) the social practices and ‘laws’ governing the place; (ii) stories of prisoners who were put in the *Lager* during the war years ‘as a punishment’ – in most cases, for participation in conspiracies or escape from forced labour. Before being taken

1 ‘Historia mówiona i wojna’, in S. Buryła, P. Rodak (eds.), *Wojna – doświadczenie i zapis. Nowe źródła, problemy, metody badawcze*, Kraków 2006.

to the camp, they would be held in custody or prison, interrogated, sometimes tortured; in many cases, they were put in several consecutive camps. For them, the camp was a trajectorial wartime experience, although not necessarily the central one. Many of these people faced repression after the war for their activities with the Home Army (AK), which has affected, in one way or another, their identity-related identifications as once-inmates; and, (iii) narratives of the youngest prisoners, taken to the *Lager* in their teens in autumn 1944 and who thus faced the final, tragic phase of the camp's operation. I focus particularly on those who found themselves in the camp, as civilians, during the Warsaw Uprising (August to early October 1944). While they spent a 'mere' few months behind the barbed wire, their stories not infrequently bear traces of the severest trauma. The Uprising had snatched them from their everyday routines under the Occupation and, all of a sudden, threw them into the concentration camp hell. This marked a sharp biographical incision, which many of these Interviewees have not yet managed to patch together and integrate with the remainder of their autobiographies. It is hard to make such experiences sensible or meaningful. This particular group of former inmates, the youngest representatives of their community, guard the collective memory of these experiences the most actively, participating in the commemorative rituals.

The fourth chapter stands out against the structure of the book – a deliberate strategy, as emphasised by the chapter's title, that refers to the narratives of female survivors of Mauthausen. I consider these narratives for a while. At the MSDP, we have recorded only three accounts in Poland of former women prisoners. None of these recordings was conducted by me personally. All these female Interviewees were sent to the camp as part of the so-called Warsaw transports, deported during the Uprising. Thus, their stories can be seen as part of the third specified group. By singling them out, my intent is to expose the specificity of the female experience of the camp, and of women's autobiographical narratives. The reason behind this digression is not just a 'gendered' reading of these accounts, building on the category of cultural gender. The biological sex is no less important, as the women particularly suffered sexual violence when in the camp and very soon after the liberation. Allow me to inoffensively uphold this differentiation, though I do realise it is not always obvious.

The typology outlined above forms, intentionally, an introduction to the crucial, third section of this study. Here I analyse three biographical interviews, interspersing my interpretive commentaries throughout with extensive extracts (transcripts). Each of these narratives belongs to one of the three types noted above, but the case studies do not illustrate a preceding argument, nor are they meant to. Instead, they are, or, in any case, ought to be, self-contained research studies intended to reveal the diverse mechanisms for the construction of autobiographical narratives by my Interviewees (in a sense, together with me, as these accounts have developed in a situation of conversation, interaction, and exchange). These mechanisms range from the macro-social through to the interactional.

I have selected three out of some thirty interviews for my analytical purposes. That each of them belongs to one of the three types I have recognised answers the question as to why I selected three stories, but it does not yet tell why just those particular ones. This choice is not easy to rationalise: the researcher's intuition has prevailed over a strict analytical procedure. Still, the choice is not completely random. The three interviews are not the 'best' of all those I have conducted with former Mauthausen prisoners. Nor are these accounts the longest or particularly 'favourite' ones. Yet, they do seem characteristic to me, typical and representative, to an extent – needless to say, in terms of so-called phenomenological, rather than statistical, representativeness. Having read several dozen transcripts, I eventually found these to be relatively 'dense', not just in terms of the number of episodes evoked and the multiplicity of biographical experiences, but also on the level of their interpretation, the richness of the meanings given to them by the narrators. This is not to say that these particular accounts offer, in a condensed form, all the elements that are dispersed across the other ones. The fact is, though, that much can be found in them.

My endeavours are centred on exposing, zooming in and commenting on the fragments of the narratives which answer the question of what the Interviewees actually remember and how they remember it. Moreover, how they interpret it, and what are the values, convictions and vision of the world that make up their frames of reference. The key motif that reoccurs across all the analyses, not just of the three specified case studies, is the attempt to recognise the position and importance of the camp experience within the context of the 'full' biographical story. This, in turn, encourages questions about the ways in which the narrators cope with this experience, about how it is integrated within the remainder of the autobiography, about its interpretation and the biographical sense and meaning added to it – or meanings added to it by different Interlocutors, or by one Interlocutor at different moments within the story.

Another important characteristic of these analyses is that I discuss not only the interview transcripts as recorded in writing but also the audio and, occasionally, video recordings. Exploring beyond the area delineated by the written text broadens the spectrum of the meanings analysed. The other broadening factors are the elements of participant observation, which give a clearer idea of the interview situation and of the circumstances accompanying its formation: the making of a 'witness' and his (or her) 'testimony'. Furthermore, the analytical scope is expanded to include the specific moments within the accounts – including moments of interrupted narration and moments when silence falls. This focus on the narrative 'here-and-now' is not just a trace of my interactionistic inspiration; it also comes as a consequence of the aforementioned methodological choices. Indeed, methodological issues are the recurring thread in multiple moments throughout the three case studies researched.

Let me make one more, concluding remark. The purpose of the analyses proposed in this book is not to validate some earlier-formulated research hypotheses, or to explain or clarify the mechanics of concentration camp as a special social

universe. This is not a necessary purpose of qualitative research. Instead, I offer a report from the process of a penetrating, ‘dense’ reading of my Interviewees’ stories – and, a guide to these stories. A reading of this sort helps, hopefully, to understand their *Lager* experience somewhat better: an experience that always remains entangled in the interactive social contexts within which the Interviewees construct their narratives, and in which we seek to read and interpret them.

This study would have never been written if not for our Interviewees, the former prisoners of the Mauthausen concentration camp system, whose stories we have recorded. I thank all of them – not only for the cordiality and openness with which they received our inquiring presence but also for the great effort of memory that they deigned to make in order to tell us about their experiences, especially the toughest, camp-related ones. There is no doubt that for most of them this involved an enormous and, in many cases, deliberate effort.

‘Our’, not ‘my’ Interviewees, I have deliberately said: although the present analyses are basically based upon the recordings I personally made, I have also used and quoted the interviews carried out by my colleagues from the KARTA Centre, with whom I worked on the MSDP project. I have taken advantage of their efforts and not only in a direct manner, by quoting extracts from the interviews they recorded or transcribed. No less important and inspiring for me, though more difficult to grasp, were the discussions we had after the recording sessions, during which we shared our experiences from our meetings with the Mauthausen survivors. I thank them for this collaboration. A special word of thanks is due to Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner, who has supported me in my efforts since the first recorded account.

I owe especial thanks also to Professor Hanna Palska, the supervisor of my doctoral thesis, which formed the basis for this study, for unremittingly upholding my conviction that I should be following my own experience and researcher’s intuition, rather than any codified research method. Without her invaluable support and confidence, I would have found myself even more embroiled in methodological doubts – rather than following the voices of the subjects researched, and recounting my own experience of this venture.

Part I: The contexts

1 Oral history and the war

It is banal to state that oral narration was the original form of storytelling, and of history-telling. Some stories were listened to attentively, their narrators being given the status of oral codifiers of the tradition. In stories told long ago, war must certainly have had an important position – just as it did in informal family, neighbourly and discussions about the past, those of old and of today. Both these forms of narration are sometimes called ‘oral history’. On certain occasions in Poland, the term is also used to refer to collections of written accounts of the past, compiled ‘on commission’. The commissioning party, or rather, those seeking to create such sources, are researchers of social life, usually social historians or sociologists. In his article *Oral history in Poland*, Jerzy Holzer illustrated such practices through the rich Polish tradition of biographical studies, which first emerged in this country in the 1930s in a number of memoir-writing competitions featuring memoirs or recollections of the unemployed, peasants, and emigrants.²

When it comes to the oral history of today, it usually focuses on recording, archiving, and analysing interviews with and accounts of the participants and witnesses to various events and developments. A somewhat stricter definition may be given of oral history as a self-aware conversation, subject to a certain discipline, between two individuals, on certain aspects of the (experienced) past that are considered historically important, with the purpose of being recorded. This assumes that the form of the account, or narrative, of such communication is a dialogue, its form and content dependant on a series of driving forces: the questions being asked (which, in turn, are based on the contexts the interviewer operates within), the interviewee’s conviction regarding what is important or crucial, the interviewee’s interpretive resources, and the actual context (or contexts, for the interviewee). The interview meeting is, thus, a dynamic interaction.³

This definition of oral history, one of the many possible suggested definitions, does not specify whether those recording the interviewee’s accounts and, in particular, those analysing them (often the same person), are interested more in the historical facts recounted or, rather, in the meanings and senses that are conferred upon these facts in the present time, i.e. at the moment when the account is given and from the perspective of the (auto)biography being reconstructed.

In oral history, accounts are analysable from two different viewpoints. To simplify and make the distinction more clear, one viewpoint can be named the

2 J. Holzer, ‘Oral history in Poland’, *BIOS – Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History and Lebensverlaufsanalysen*, special issue: 1990, p. 41.

3 Cf. L. Shopes, *Making sense of oral history*, available at: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/oral.pdf>, pp. 2–3. [Accessed 2.09.2015.]

historical and the other the sociological⁴ – although this by no means suggests that the former is the ‘property’ of historians and the latter of sociologists.

From the perspective of history (history as an academic discipline), oral history narratives are approached as additional, complementary historical sources of second rank to written texts. The less remote the period covered by the narrative, the greater its factual value. Such accounts are sometimes referred to in particular in studies on social history, research on the history of the everyday, and whenever one seeks knowledge on the past from ‘ordinary people’ – the witnesses and participants of the events investigated who may not have been offered other opportunities to share their experiences. Traditional historiography, built upon positivistic foundations, has a negative approach to oral history narratives: they are seen (indeed, quite rightly) as subjective, dependent on the circumstances in which they were created, irresolute, and distorting of the facts owing to their emotion-imbued assessments of the events reported upon. Although many of these charges are equally pertinent to other historical sources, it is oral history that is subject to severe criticism and is ranked last in the catalogue of legitimate methods employed to establish the facts.

From the perspective of sociology, an oral history narrative does not seek to answer ‘what it was like in reality’: its purpose is to determine what the interviewees have actually remembered and how they recount their memories, how do they assess or evaluate them, and what meaning(s) do they ascribe to the events or episodes they recall. The historian Michael Frisch says that oral history accounts cannot be put on a par with other historical sources and treated as raw data subject to critical analysis, in the same way that historians process all the other sources they analyse.⁵ For Alessandro Portelli, one of the pioneers of oral history, the interview is a subjective act of memory which may (and usually does) contain errors, factual inconsistencies, and erroneous interpretations that miss the facts. Yet, as he adds immediately, these errors, exaggerations, and myths can lead us beyond the facts and to the meanings ascribed to them by the interviewees, where they gain meaning through the stories they tell.⁶ This is why oral history is not primarily a search for new facts but, rather, an interpretive occurrence where the interviewee must compress his or her story into an account lasting a few hours, selecting the episodes of their story and deciding, more or less consciously, what to tell and how to tell it. An interview is a recollection in real time of a testimony of the past as it was inscribed in the interviewee’s memory. It is an act of memory

4 M. Melchior, *Zagłada tożsamość. Polscy Żydzi ocaleni na aryjskich papierach. Analiza doświadczenia biograficznego*, Warszawa, 2004, pp. 16–17.

5 M. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, Albany, 1990, pp. 159–160.

6 A. Portelli, *Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, Albany, 1991, p. 2.

that is dependent on the moment in which the interview is carried out as well as on the (hi)story it relates.

The interview develops each time in response to the specific person, the questions asked, and the subjects raised. At the same time, it should be restated, it also constitutes the interviewee's reply to his or her internal need to add meaning, or sense, to his or her own experiences. Language conventions, beliefs or convictions, assessments and evaluations all play a role here. In reflecting the speaker's state of consciousness and the cultural context in which he or she moves, it reveals his or her identity; what is more, it is, or can be, the identity of their testimony. Therefore, when analysing oral history interviews, one should seek not merely the recounted events but also – and, perhaps, foremost – who says it, what it is that he or she is saying, to whom, to what purpose, and in which circumstances.

Oral history thus comprehended may become a source for interdisciplinary research, and a source to be used in a variety of studies: historical, sociological, anthropological, and psychological (especially, in the humanistic orientation). It could be claimed, somewhat magniloquently, that the multidimensional or multi-tier structure of the narratives collected as part of oral history stems in a way from, continues and is a consequence of the multidimensional nature of human fate and human experience. Hence, the difficulty perhaps in perceiving oral history unambiguously as a part of a single academic discipline, especially when understood as a narrow concept. But there comes yet another legitimate purpose for indulging in such an activity: an attempt to comprehend the human lot.

The audio or video recording of the interviewees' accounts and the subsequent archiving of tapes with the sound and image that was recorded ('tape' being an increasingly conventional word, as recordings in a digital format or their subsequent digitisation is becoming a standard, and enables the data to be stored on a computer, CDs, DVDs and other modern carriers) is today a constitutive element of any reputable oral history project. Why does a reliable transcript of the account not suffice? What is the reason for the considerable investment (as opposed to the total costs and expenses of any oral history project) made to preserve the 'source material'? Such questions may seem rhetorical. The conventional practice thus far in the delivery of most Polish sociology – and, more generally, social science – research projects of using cassette tapes containing the recorded interviews being removed (or, at least, not archived) once the material had been transcribed brings to mind the answers to these questions.

If we accept that accounts, or narratives, are recorded not just, or even primarily, in order to establish new facts, and if we concede that no less important are the interviewee's own interpretations of these facts, the meanings they ascribe to them, the senses and meanings given to individual experiences within the perspective of their overall biographies, and the emotions surrounding the recollection and recounting of the events experienced, then the focus must (also) be on the very activity of telling, of recounting one's own (and the others') (hi)story. By being attentive when listening to the interviewee's recorded voice or when watching a video-recorded account, we can better understand the non-verbal messages and

take a more careful look at the structure of the narration and detect its supra-historical dimension.

Abandoning intertextual analysis is not the point here. Such analysis remains basic, as a good transcription enables us to pause at details which are difficult to grasp when listening to or watching an account. The point is, rather, to reach beyond the text, to hear and see what the text has not been able to render. One important reason for the failure to render everything is that the interviewee's words form only a fragment, and not always the most important one, of the multi-layered communication that has come about during the meeting between the interviewee and the record-taker, through which interactive process an oral testimony emerges. The tone or pitch, strength and intonation of the voice, the rhythm and pace of the speech, the pauses – all these are part of the communication, and bearers of meanings, which are not easy to render in a transcription.⁷

Video-recorded interviews, once archived, are of even greater value in the search for such extra- or supra-textual meanings. They ensure the best point of observation for the processes of recalling and interpreting occurrences or episodes (or 'just' stories of them which are ready-to-use, and have been tried and tested many times), constructing through their use a potentially coherent and communicable narrative of the past. And, much better than a written text, such interviews enable us to see the interactive character of oral history testimonies.

In his analysis of interviews with Holocaust survivors, James E. Young points to a further dimension, a cinematographic narrative that is created by the medium itself: a videotape that moves in one direction: "Implicit in the lateral movement of film and *video* is a sense of sequence, a linear causality that suggests explanations for events: underlying every testimony – in its beginning, middle, and end – is a particular understanding of events." The witness's video testimony becomes 'a narrative within a narrative', while "the tendency to slip from one narrative level to the other becomes a natural one". Taking this a step further (and deeper), Young finds that three elements compose a video testimony: "the survivor's story, the telling of the story, and the audiovisual taping of testimony".⁸

A somewhat atypical example is some of the accounts videotaped by Claude Lanzmann for use in his documentary film *Shoah*. Particularly expressive from this perspective is, to my mind, the narrative of Jan Karski – his countenance and facial expression, mimicry and gestures, the tension in his voice, the movement of his whole body, his request to cut the shooting are all an integral part of the testimony he is giving. This example is atypical since nobody, I think, would call the Lanzmann film an oral history project. But I have no doubt that the way in which he made it, with some three hundred taped hours from which just nine were

7 Ibidem, pp. 46–47.

8 J. E. Young, 'Holocaust Video and Cinematographic Testimony. Documenting the Witness', in *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust. Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1988, p. 158.

included in his well-known documentary, converges at a number of points with the path along which oral history projects tend to unfold, whenever the witness/participant narrative is videotaped.

Yet, it is not just the method of recording and the form in which the interviewee's story is taped that matters in terms of the testimony's content (the differentiation of form and content is rather questionable in this case, as has been made apparent above). More important are the questions asked by the person doing the taping and the way he or she asks them. Oral history projects which intend to go beyond merely determining historical facts usually employ a narrative interview technique, which in most cases is biography-oriented. The point is for the interlocutor to be able to recount his story/biography without restraint and within it, by using his or her own categories, report on the events which are the actual reason as to why the interviewer is visiting him or her – as a participant or witness, survivor, observer, victim or more rarely, a perpetrator. The interviewee's knowledge and our knowledge of the biographical events that are the cause of the meeting and the interview recording session obviously inform the content of the testimony.

The withdrawn position of the narrative leader (interviewer) is meant to help create a space for communication in which the individual telling their story builds their narration, and shapes the story, possibly without any support and without being asked questions. The person doing the recording is mainly tasked, in this first part of the conversation (it still is a conversation, after all), with preserving the openness of this space: staying open toward the witness and the topics that he or she appears willing or otherwise to raise or take up, the manner in which they are introduced and depicted, the shape of the story being built and discontinued. Questions are asked only when the narrator halts the narrative flow, awaiting an impulse from the outside, so that the narrative character of the interview may also be present during this question phase. It is recommended that the questions asked – first, those that follow the interviewee's free narrative, which aim to extend and complement it, and afterwards those prepared by the interviewer on the subject matter being investigated – continue being open-ended, triggering the memory of the individual as they respond to and interpret their story and raising more and more images from their memory.⁹

We have now passed from individuals telling their own (hi)stories into the area of qualitative research methods and techniques in the social sciences. Indeed, the so-called biographical method is at many points convergent with oral history. In practice, the same research work is probably carried out under different labels. But it is not the label that matters: of importance is caring about what Florian Znaniecki called the humanistic coefficient – the conviction that every human being is an expert, the best connoisseur of their own universe, and it is to them that the floor should be given – in an attempt to move closer to comprehending this

9 Cf., for instance, F.-J. Brüggemeier, D. Wierling, *Einführung in die Oral History. Kurseinheit 2: Das Interview*, Hagen, 1986, pp. 20 ff.

universe. Norman Denzin has formulated this same postulate in a more pragmatic fashion, stating that, “human behaviour must be examined and understood from the viewpoint of those that it concerns”.¹⁰ This conviction is shared by exponents of humanistic sociology as well as oral history. And, it takes – and must take – primacy, let us add, before a too scrupulously codified methodology.

One possible example of such a consistent codification of all the stages of the research process is Fritz Schütze’s biographical sociology, stemming from the interpretive orientation (which was chiefly, though not exclusively, inspired by symbolic interactionism).¹¹ But Schütze is – seemingly, although this would not be admitted by his adversaries – far from putting forward a dogmatic demand to apply, each time and without exception, all the assumptions of the method he has developed for carrying out and analysing narrative interviews (the most important part of which is the interviewee’s unrestrained biographical story, undistorted by questions).

One of the largest oral history projects to be conducted is that of Yale University’s Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, featuring filmed interviews. The project’s methodology for collecting information is briefly yet succinctly summarised on its website:

The Archive’s interviewing methodology stresses the leadership role of the witness in structuring and telling his or her own story. Questions are primarily used to ascertain time and place, or elicit additional information about topics already mentioned, with an emphasis on open-ended questions that give the initiative to the witness. The witnesses are the experts in their own life story, and the interviewers are there to listen, to learn, and to clarify.¹²

Another, no less substantive, suggestion put forth by Denzin concerns the primacy of meaning for the method used in biographical analysis. It essentially touches upon ethical issues. With interviews with individuals who have had traumatic biographical experiences, this ethical (and therapeutic) dimension of the conversation tends to be particularly important – more important than the rigidly applied methodological assumptions employed in taping the interviews. Referring to her experience as an interviewer of Holocaust survivors, Barbara Engelking wrote:

10 N.K. Denzin, ‘Reinterpretacja metody biograficznej w socjologii: znaczenie a metoda w analizie biograficznej’, in J. Włodarek, M. Ziółkowski (eds.), *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii*, Warszawa, 1990, p. 53.

11 F. Schütze, ‘Biographieforschung und narratives Interview’, *Neue Praxis*, 1983, no. 3. For the most exhaustive coverage of Fritz Schütze’s biographistic sociology concept in Polish literature, see A. Rokuszewska-Pawełek, *Chaos i przymus. Trajektorie wojenne Polaków – analiza biograficzna*, Łódź, 2002.

12 <http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/about/index.html> [sect.: About the Archive/ Introduction]. [Accessed 2.09.2015.]

Many people, when they recall their sufferings, relive them; it would not be ethical in this situation to create a barrier and leave the narrator alone with revived memories of the past. Confronted by the other person's suffering, the listener must at least attempt to participate in it, and must provide support, creating an atmosphere of trust and understanding. For these reasons, I believe that the only possible way of conducting the conversation is participation and involvement on the part of the researcher; to apply inflexible rules of research to auto-narration would be absurd and immoral, and would moreover make it impossible to obtain credible material.¹³

The narrative character of an account is assumed, I should think, in all oral history projects. The point is for the interviewer not to tell a story, or recount history, in general – what things were like – but what happened, or occurred, to him or her, and what he or she has actually experienced. Oral history interviews are not about telling the so-called objectivised, textbook-formatted history, which is far from the individual human experience: they are about the narrator interpreting his or her own experiences, through their narration.

However, the interviewer's focus on his or her individual fate does not make an account biographical. Moreover, such an assumption is not always made; accounts are usually recorded because of an individual's specific experience, an episode in his or her life, sometimes a single occurrence or some aspect of their biography. But the demand to biographise the narrative – with the interviewer (re)constructing the interviewee's biography and inserting into it, as one among the many, the fragments that we or the interviewer consider particularly important – is also valid with thematic interviews. It is to be expected that in an autobiographical narrative of this kind, only certain selected images are produced from the speaker's memory: ones that prove to be important, for some reason or another. More than in the colloquial meaning, biography here means a construction developed by the interlocutor in response to the impulse given by the inquiring/recording interviewer. But such a construction is not completely freeform: it is built from the memory of the experiences and from the meanings ascribed to them. And, from the interpretations assumed by the interviewee – be they on the level of the language with which he or she communicates his or her experience. What is, then, the rationale behind, and in favour of, the biographical method in oral history?

The first, and most basic, argument is that when requesting the interviewee for an autobiographical story, a clear message is given that researcher is interested in more than just the events he or she witnessed or participated in, and they are instead also interested in the individual and his or her unique experience. The

13 B. Engelking (ed. by G.S. Paulson), *Holocaust and Memory. The Experience of the Holocaust and Its Consequences: An Investigation Based on Personal Narratives*, transl. from the Polish by Emma Harris, Leicester University Press, London, New York, 2002 [first published in Polish as *Zagłada i pamięć. Doświadczenia Holocaustu i jego konsekwencje opisane na podstawie relacji autobiograficznych*, IFiS PAN 1994, 2nd ed. 2001], pp. 7–8.

interviewee thus gains a greater space for unrestrained narration about this particular experience. As already remarked, discovering hitherto unknown facts is not the main reason behind oral history. For memory is not a depository of facts but an active process of giving meaning. Hence, there are no 'false' oral testimonies: all are psychologically 'true' and their truth may be no less crucial than a reliable factual source.¹⁴ In biographical accounts, such subjective truth may be expressed in a less restrained way, while for us the listeners it appears in a context that facilitates the understanding of its meanings. Biographical accounts offer the interviewee more space for the stories they are willing to tell.

Referring to empirical examples from his own investigations, Paul Thompson, author of *The Voice of the Past* – possibly the best-known book on oral history, first published in 1978 in the United Kingdom and reprinted several times afterwards – argues that we can benefit more from biographical accounts because they enable subsequent scholars to ask new questions. For this reason, he encourages the recording of biographical accounts, even if we are only interested in a fragment of the interviewee's life or in his or her specific experience(s). Thompson's arguments became even more salient if we bear in mind that he helped develop the main British qualitative data archive, Qualidata, and is a theoretician and practitioner of the reanalysis of qualitative data gathered by the social sciences.¹⁵

The position occupied by wartime experiences in oral history accounts is worth considering, especially given that, as a rule, for many interviewees these experiences form their key biographical experience. They not infrequently prove to have been a turning point in their biographies and, to a crucial degree, have shaped their whole subsequent post-war life. Memory of war forms an essential part of identity. In one's later years, when one's main daily physical activities are in decline, these memories are strongly revived. In an account recorded almost sixty years after the war's end, one former prisoner of Auschwitz and, subsequently, Mauthausen said the following about the working of his memory:

In the beginning, you wanted to be as distant as possible from all that – from the camp. But no, this is coming back now, by itself. Now that I am retired, the reminiscences are constantly recurring. I cannot get away from it. There are moments when I'm at a social meeting when I can detach myself from that reality, but when I'm on my own, then the thoughts come over me, they're coming over me all the time. This is what you cannot forget.¹⁶

14 A. Portelli, op. cit., p. 51.

15 P. Thompson, 'Re-using Qualitative Research Data: A Personal Account', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Research [On-line Journal]*, 1(3), December 2000, <http://qualitative-research.net/fqs-eng.htm>.

16 From the account of Jan Wojciech Topolewski, former Auschwitz-Birkenau and Mauthausen inmate, recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner, as part of the

This quotation does not relate to one specific event; rather, it is a generalised reminiscence of a certain experience and psychological state and, moreover, a reflection upon it, an auto-interpretation. Yet, it is long-term event-related memory that forms the core content of narrated accounts. The experiences that occurred during the course of the war were often unexpected and unique to the interviewees – and, as has been said, key for their biographies and identities. They involved strong emotions. In a number of cases, the traumatic wartime experience is so central to the biography that is being (re)constructed, in a history of one's life that is recounted without restraint, that anything which occurred before or after it is reduced to a generalisation. A number of questions are thus required from the interviewer in order for the rest of the life story to be elaborated upon. This cannot be explained completely by what the interviewee may believe that they should be talking about when narrating, in response to their projected expectations of the interviewer doing the recording. Reverse situations also occur, however, where the traumatic war experiences are omitted or neglected in the account – not because they have been erased from the memory but, more frequently, because they are a painful part of the memory, which is better left untouched. The refusal to meet and talk protects these individuals from deepening the trauma of their wartime experiences. This is why the empathy and tact of the interviewer making the recording, his or her openness and ability to provide psychological support is so important. Some oral history projects, particularly those involving Holocaust survivors, specifically recommend that the recordings be made by psychologists.

Nonetheless, it is also often the case that it is the very act of speaking (and only when this opportunity arises) that brings relief and helps an individual who has been seriously affected by the war rebuild a sense of dignity. In this case, the opportunity provided by the interview responds to the basic human need to communicate, to be heard and accepted. The interviewee's conviction that they and their individual history is important for others, that it will be recorded and archived and thus become a 'testimony', reinforces the sense of acceptance and boosts the confidence of a fair number of interviewees. The opportunity to meet another individual in order to recount one's personal history builds a relationship of trust and intimacy, thus giving the interviewee a feeling of safety. This feeling of safety is potentially reinforced by the fact that there is no direct, family relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer, as they are two individuals who have no permanent connection but simply part after the meeting, each return to his or her own world. It is often the case that the interviewee entrusts the interviewer with their traumatic stories, rather than saddling their close relatives with them. A person from the world they do not experience on a daily basis is emotionally a safer and 'easier' listener.

Psychologists studying the human memory and memorisation processes are unable to answer exactly what this memory is, what it is that we remember, and how we actually do this. Instead of precise medical data, they offer a series of vivid metaphors.¹⁷ A selective and socially determined human memory is the most obvious element. This is also true for biographical accounts featuring the war – perhaps even more so than for other accounts. Hardly any past occurrence has left in the collective memory a trace as distinct as World War II has. Its memory, incessantly maintained, renewed, and negotiated, is an essential element of national identity. We have recently witnessed a revival of this memory (given that we are in the final phase of being able to seek the individual memory of its still living conscious participants, victims, witnesses, and perpetrators). Written biographical testimonies, oral family messages, accounts collected as part of oral history projects, all make an essential contribution to the collective memory. But the reverse influence is no less powerful: generic narratives and images shaping the collective memory inform the design of individual narrative biographies, their interpretation, assessment and evaluation, and the meanings given to one's own experiences. Oral history interviews are perfectly designed for recognising the dominant narrative patterns – the so-called master narratives – within which various collective wartime experiences are arranged.

Another feature of accounts related to the war is that the psychological rules of recounting the history of one's life are attenuated. The narrator's ordinary need (and language habit) to place themselves at the centre of events, ascribing their actions or agency to themselves, maintaining the illusion of an autonomous shaping of the biography – all this collides in these accounts with the coercive force of external circumstances, restriction, annihilation of the potential to plan one's own life (or, sometimes, simply to plan the very next day), or to make any choices whatsoever. Such external circumstances are characteristic of wartime. Instead of the 'ordinary' control of one's own fate, what is dominant in these stories is the sense of disorganisation and suffering. Such a message is strongest in the accounts of individuals who during the war were enclosed in ghettos, prisons or concentration camps, or stayed in hiding. In his typology of biographical processes, Fritz Schütze calls this state of having lost control of one's own life a trajectory.¹⁸

Silence, moments of discontinued narration caused by the inability to talk, express, and articulate the memory and its accompanying emotions are not instances of broken communication. On the contrary, they convey an essential message, one that is full of meanings, and this is particularly true for oral history

17 Cf. A. Hankała, *Wybiórczość ludzkiej pamięci*, Warszawa, 2001; T. Maruszewski, *Pamięć autobiograficzna*, Gdańsk, 2005.

18 F. Schütze, 'Biographieforschung und narratives interview', *Neue Praxis*, vol. 13, 1983; F. Schütze, Prozeßstrukturen des Lebensablaufs, in J. Matthes, A. Pfeifenberger, M. Stosberg (eds.), *Biographie in handlungswissenschaftlicher Perspektive*, Nürnberg, 1981, pp. 67–156. For the most complete presentation of this concept available to the Polish reader, see A. Rokuszewska-Pawełek, op. cit., pp. 75–88.

accounts of wartime experiences. With these, it is worth listening even more attentively to the silences, rather than confining oneself to reading transcripts with dotted lines. The interviewee's broken voice, the moments of silence and affection accompanying it – the breakdown of defensive mechanisms under the onslaught of afflicting recollections – these unveil the interviewee, making them defenceless against us for a while. This (for a sensitive researcher) may create an ethical bond, a moral obligation – easier to bear if we can, as it were, take the witness's side; but also hard, when therapeutic action is needed, whenever we want to or must stand up to the interviewee, such as in interviews with perpetrators.¹⁹

It is generally accepted that the first oral history project (in the sense given at the beginning) was conducted by the American historian Allan Nevins. In 1948, at Columbia University, he initiated the systematic and disciplined taping, archiving and disclosure, for further research, of accounts given by 'witnesses of history'. Nevins was working on a biography of President Grover Cleveland and had recorded accounts of the individuals who had surrounded the president. Such was the beginning of the first research centre for oral history, the Columbia Oral History Research Office. Today, the archive houses some 8,000 interviews.

Interest in elites, the people representing political and major business circles, characterised the origins of oral history in the United States. Also characteristic was the conviction that oral history was, in the first place, an archival activity: gathering oral accounts to be used by historians as a complement to traditional written sources. It was strongly emphasised that no deviation from historiographical rules were possible, as objectivity remained the most important criterion.²⁰

Yet, from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, oral history has been associated with completely different purposes and subject matters – documenting people who until then were particularly underrepresented in historiography, or present in it only indirectly, as they did not produce the traditional types of sources that historians usually investigated. Social researchers, including historians, first began recording interviews with 'ordinary people' from a variety of social strata and

19 Interviews and research of this kind have been pursued intensively in recent years by historians, sociologists and psychologists in Germany and Austria. This obviously arouses considerable emotion and animated discussions, which not infrequently go beyond the confines of specialist periodicals, or even beyond a strictly scholarly framework. In Germany, this trend includes, for example, the studies by Gabriele Rosenthal and, more recently, Harald Welzer in particular. Welzer edited the famous book *Opa war kein Nazi* (Frankfurt am Main, 2002), and also authored a more recent one: *Täter. Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005). Among the Austrian scholars, Gerhard Botz (and his students) deserves a mention in this context, in particular for the book he edited, *Schweigen und Reden einer Generation. Erinnerungsgespräche mit Opfern, Täter und Mitläufern des Nationalsozialismus* (Wien, 2007).

20 R.J. Grele, 'Oral History in the United States', *BIOS – Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History and Lebensverlaufsanalysen*, special issue: 1990, p. 5.

regions, including representatives of various minorities. The aim, however, was not simply to investigate new subjects: it was to write a new history 'from below'. Of crucial importance to this reorientation were leftist political stance of western (European) oral historians. In Europe, oral history has always served social history. In the mid-1970s, a British team headed by Paul Thompson recorded several hundred accounts with interviewees born between 1870 and 1906. These interviews formed the basis of Thompson's well-known book *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (New York, 1975).

The subsequent stage in the development of oral history was the refocus from the subject matter recounted to the witnesses themselves, with an increasing interest in their personal lives. The focus on biography, on the history of the narrator's life, meant a closer association with qualitative sociology, and it assumed two forms. Representatives of the more traditional current, represented, for instance, by Paul Thompson and, in France, by Daniel Bertaux, strive to reconstruct an objective reality that is hidden behind the interviewee's account, to elucidate the social processes that define his or her biography; to understand the subjective dimensions of (the) life, and to determine the interrelations between (the) life and social structure and social change.

Advocates of this more recent direction, which today exists in parallel with the older one, focus on the interpretive procedures that contribute to the biography and co-produce the life story. There is a stronger emphasis on the narration itself, which is no longer approached as a neutral medium or a gateway to a reality but as a construction. This current, sometimes called narratology by its detractors, has mostly been developed in Germany, where oral history today appears primarily to be developing into a form of biographical studies (for example in the work of Gabriele Rosenthal, Fritz Schütze, or – to some extent – Alexander von Plato).

It is worth pointing out that alongside what we can call, to simplify, the academic current of oral history, there is another one at play, which, again, for the sake of simplification, I call the popular-educational current. This consists, among other things, of youth workshops and competitions, popular handbooks that provide a basic knowledge and encourage the user to record interviews with the older members of their families and their neighbours as well as to document local history. It would be unfair to reduce these activities – which are widespread today – to a sentimental game. The recordings collected as part of such local projects run for young people often remain the only record of their interviewees' memory; therefore, it is right that they be archived (as is increasingly the case). This form of oral history activity is also popular in Poland.²¹

In parallel with these diverse documentary projects, oral history archives are also developing. A few dozen are associated with American universities, those at Yale

21 This can be seen in the 'Historia bliska' ['My Near-History'] series of youth history competitions, held since 1996 by the KARTA Centre and the Stefan Batory Foundation. The competition archive nearly 8,000 items at present.

and Columbia having already been mentioned. The archive of the Visual History Foundation in Los Angeles, with its over 50,000 video testimonies of Holocaust survivors, is incomparable to any other in terms of size. This collection has recently been made available in Europe too, including at Berlin's Freie Universität and Charles University in Prague. Other oral history collections in Western Europe are much more modest in terms of the number of recordings stored. Two important centres are Essex University in the United Kingdom, with its *Qualidata* archive, initiated by Paul Thompson, and the *Deutsches Gedächtnis* archive in Lüdenscheid, Germany.

Moreover, oral history accounts are also being recorded and archived by a number of modern history museums, and even libraries. In these cases, the scholarly current coincides with the popularisation trend. Proactive in acquiring witness accounts are the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the British Library Sound Archive, for instance. A special group of museums and archives is that of the memory sites set up in the spaces of former concentration camps. Fragments of audio and video interviews with witnesses/participants of history are, with increasing frequency, being included in museum presentations, films and documentaries and radio broadcasts. In Germany and Austria, a number of memory sites located in former concentration camps have recently been completely redeveloped (such as at Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen, and Gusen). Sound recordings and filmed accounts of former inmates have been made part of the display.

January 2009 saw the opening at the Freie Universität in Berlin (where Shoah Visual History Foundation accounts are available) of an archive belonging to the International Slave and Forced Labourers Documentation Project. As part of this project, some six hundred interviews have been recorded with former forced labourers as well as concentration camp inmates and Holocaust survivors across Europe, in the United States, Israel, and South Africa. The uniqueness of this archive lies in the fact that, unlike its peers, it is available online in its entirety. With internet access, anyone can listen to and watch several hundred audio and video accounts, in their entirety, and read their transcripts in one of the almost thirty languages in which they have been conducted, without leaving home. There are some eighty narratives to be found in Polish, but there are many more 'Polish' ones, in a broader sense (featuring Polish Jews who did not return home or migrated after the war, or Poles 'in the West'). Such access to a large archive of biographical interviews offers completely new research opportunities. This online archive may mark an important moment in the development of oral history, and of biographical studies as part of the social sciences: something much more than merely greater access to the sources.

The term 'oral history' has not been fully 'naturalised' in the Polish academic context – even though a lot has changed in this respect the last couple of years.²² This

22 The term is usually rendered into Polish as *historia mówiona* [roughly, 'spoken history'] or *historia ustna/oralna* ['oral history']; the original English term is in use as well.

is because oral history does not have a long-established history in the country. For many years there was no established culture of the planned collection of responses from people who may be ready to tell their stories, and the audio and video recording, archiving, analysing, and interpreting of such interviews had – until recently – no chance to develop in Poland. As a direct consequence of this deficit, there have been no much methodological or substantial discussions within academic historiography on the potentials (and limitations) offered by the recording and storing of testimonies of memory that have been recorded with the use of audiotape or videotape (which are increasingly being replaced by digital technologies).

The soliciting and collecting of oral history sources was not – and basically is still not – facilitated by the attitude of most historians, who were sceptical towards the inclusion of (not to say, giving equal rights to) oral history sources in historical research and studies. In contrast with countries that have developed oral history cultures, there have also been no – with a few important exceptions that appeared only in the 1980s – non-academic milieus in Poland that, regardless of any potential criticism from traditional historiographers, would have been able to record, on a broader scale, the memories of the witnesses to/participants of history, as evoked in their autobiographical stories. In those cases where such documentation did take place, it was mostly on the initiative of sociologists who took recordings of in-depth interviews and biographical accounts as part of specific research projects. Once a project was completed and its outcome published, the source material usually fell into oblivion. Unfortunately, it was rarely, if at all, considered that such recordings should be archived, for them to be reanalysed (in a broader manner, or from a different perspective by future researchers) and reused for the purpose of further study. Even less consideration was given to their possible reuse by researchers in other disciplines. Even if someone had contemplated such an option, it was difficult to know what to do with these resources, which archive to place the recordings in, and where to seek assistance for this. But in most cases, it was methodological rigidity and the attachment of scholars to their own research disciplines that prevented them from considering the possibility that an account, especially if biographical, may provide research material for a historian, a sociologist, an anthropologist, a psychologist, ...

Still, the strongest restraints towards a more animated development of oral history were, at a deeper level and of a systemic nature. The People's Republic of Poland was not a state that cared about documenting and nurturing individual memory. On the contrary: a strict watch was kept on those potentially obstructing the efforts for a top-down projection of collective consciousness. To deliver such a project, the silent and obedient stones of physical monuments proved a much better fit than some inconsistent human stories. But monuments were made not only of stone: human (hi)stories were also made use of, as they were squeezed into a heroic-martyrological pattern of 'commemorating' events of a specified sort, and their ready-made interpretations. This was a safe scheme (and one that gave a

sense of safety), as it was distant from the authentic experiences to which it allegedly referred. A typical example of such pacification, re forging, and channelling by the state of individual memories of the war was, for many years, the Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy (ZBoWiD), particularly in the first years of its activity.²³ This central, politically manipulated, commemorative organisation embraced – among many other groups of victims – also the concentration camp survivors.

It is no surprise, then, that documentary activities, which we would today call oral history projects, were so scarce in the People's Poland. Those projects that did occur – all of them coming late, without the 'oral history' label and without being embedded in such a tradition – were usually counter-systemic. In his 1990 essay quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Jerzy Holzer wrote that the Polish experience of oral history was dominated by political themes or, at least, had been shaped by political developments.²⁴ Among such examples, he mentions journalistic books based on recorded accounts: Teresa Torańska's *Oni* (Warszawa, 1985); Jacek Trznadel's *Hańba domowa. Rozmowy z pisarzami* (Warszawa, 1986); and Jarosław Maciejewski and Zofia Trojanowicz's *Poznański Czerwiec 1956* (Poznań, 1981). Holzer also points to the activity of the Gdańsk-based Social Studies Centre, which during the era of the Solidarity trade union was legalised for the first time (1980–1) and collected interviews on the December 1970 events in the Polish coastal area (Grudzień 1970, Paris 1986). This initiative was cut short when martial law was imposed in December 1981. More than the fact that these are mostly journalism-based studies, more important for our present purpose is that none of them concerns World War II – the key biographical experience of the generation in question.

The only oral history project (in the strict sense, which encompasses recording and archiving the accounts of the 'witnesses of history', regardless of the name then used) covering wartime experiences mentioned in Holzer's essay is the documentation of the fate of the Poles who were subject to repression in the East (inmates of Soviet lagers, deportees). This was initiated in 1987 by the KARTA (then still an illegal underground organisation) under the name 'Eastern Archive' (Archiwum Wschodnie). This later became one of the pillars of the now legal KARTA Centre (Ośrodek KARTA), with a collection of over 1,200 audio accounts from across Poland.

It is interesting to note that, when writing of the meagre, almost negligible, oral history tradition in communist Poland, Holzer neglected to mention the interviews and accounts that had been collected by the memorial museums, sites of memory located in the areas of the former concentration camps. The fact is that almost

23 See J. Wawrzyniak, 'Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację – ewolucja ideologii a więź grupowa', in D. Stola, P. Osęka (eds.), *Trwanie i zmiana*, Warszawa, 2003.

24 J. Holzer, op. cit., pp. 45–46.

all of these institutions, although each on a different scale, collected and are still collecting such documentation. The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, and the museums of Majdanek, Gross-Rosen, and Stutthof have together collected several thousand accounts. Since Holzer did not mention them in a study on oral history, can we classify this as an omission? Not necessarily, because most of these testimonies should be classified – according to Michael Pollak’s important typology – as statements that were submitted to historical committees, rather than oral history interviews. They are closer to statements given to a court than to unrestrained narratives about one’s life. The conditions in which the interviews were done are completely different in both cases.²⁵ Or, at least, they used to be, as contemporary documentation of this (oral) kind as collected by these memorial museums is methodologically much closer to the standards accepted in oral history.

In the past ten or so years, there has been another outburst of interest, no longer constrained by the State, in recording, popularising, and researching accounts of the ‘witnesses of history’ (including historic heroes and victims) in which the war is an essential, sometimes the key, experience. Biographical interviews in which World War II is the central subject have become the basis for several important research projects in the Polish social sciences (and the basis for their ‘qualitative paradigm’).²⁶ The authors of most of these projects often cite the tradition of Polish biographical sociology, specifically the work of Florian Znaniecki. One important example is the project *Biography and National Identity*, conducted in the mid-1990s by the Chair of Cultural Sociology at the University of Łódź. Several dozen biographical interviews were recorded with individuals who had survived the Occupation in central Poland and the Eastern Borderland area. The comparison of various wartime experiences and an analysis of the ways in which they are reported as part of the biographical narrative, during the interview, have formed the basis for a number of publications.²⁷ Holocaust studies today also tend to analyse the individual experiences of survivors based on their biographical interviews; important examples of such analyses are the works by Barbara Engelking and Małgorzata Melchior mentioned above.

Characteristic to all the research discussed so far is an interest focused not quite (and, certainly, not only) on the events or episodes being recounted but primarily

25 M. Pollak, *Die Grenzen des Sagbaren: Lebensgeschichte von KZ-Überlebenden als Augenzeugenberichte und als Identitätsarbeit*, Frankfurt am Main–New York, 1988, pp. 95–112; M. Czyżewski, A. Piotrowski, A. Rokuszewska-Pawełek (eds.), *Biografia a tożsamość narodowa*, Łódź, 1997.

26 One example being the aforementioned study by B. Engelking, op. cit.; or, that by M. Melchior, op. cit.

27 The major ones being: K. Kaźmierska, *Doświadczenie wojenne Polaków a kształtowanie tożsamości etnicznej. Analiza narracji kresowych*, Warszawa, 1999; and, A. Rokuszewska-Pawełek, op. cit.

on the meanings given to them by the interviewees in their stories and biographies, their (auto-)interpretations. The interviews are not meant to determine a 'historical truth' but are instead an attempt at understanding the individual truth of each interviewee. This is why the word 'identity' appears so frequently. These testimonies were not called oral history, although this name may well have been applied had it been more common in Poland.

There is yet one more publication of accounts and interviews that is in effect an oral history of the war. This is the series of conversations with Warsaw Ghetto soldiers held (and recorded) by Anka Grupińska. In his introduction to the transcribed conversations, Paweł Szapiro rightly calls them a 'Holocaust oral history'.²⁸ This book well shows the essence of telling one's own stories, of recording the 'memory of those who remember'. The conversations and stories contained in it are also expressive because they are plainspoken, free of commentary, and free of any categories drawn from outside the world being recounted.

The publications mentioned above are just a few select examples, of which there are not many in Poland. Yet, it is no coincidence that, recently, more have started to appear. It is not by chance that so many interviews, accounts, conversations, and recordings with people who can remember World War II, and who consciously experienced it, have been appearing more and more in recent times. In a few years, it will be too late to create an oral history out of that particular experience. It is the sense that once the 'witnesses' have gone then we will irretrievably lose something very important, not only in terms of historical knowledge, that has inspired so many oral history projects. The largest, already mentioned, is Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the University of Southern California (USC) Shoah Foundation – The Institute for Visual History and Education, carried out between 1994 and 1999, within which 52,000 accounts were video-recorded in fifty-six countries and in thirty-two languages (some 1,500 were made in Poland). The interviewees were primarily Jews, Holocaust survivors, and alongside them, the Romani people, former concentration camp inmates, witnesses in the war crimes trials of the post-war years, and American soldiers who liberated the camps. Today, the Spielberg Foundation strives for the dissemination of these testimonies for educational purposes in the countries where the recordings were originally done. The motivation is, quite rightly, that the witness's voice and face can tell something more than a textbook can. Learning imbued with emotion promises to be more efficient.

The largest European oral history project covering one Nazi concentration camp system was the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project. Initiated and funded by the Austrian Ministry for the Interior, it was managed by the University of Vienna and the Vienna-based Conflict Research Institute. In 2002–3, a total of 860 biographical accounts (10 per cent of which were video recorded) of former inmates of the Mauthausen camps were recorded in nineteen European countries

28 A. Grupińska, *Ciągle po kole. Rozmowy z żołnierzami getta warszawskiego*, Warszawa, 2000 (foreword by P. Szapiro).

as well as in Argentina, Canada, Israel and the United States. In Poland, the project was run by the KARTA Centre, which recorded 164 interviews (including 17 videos). These are now available in audio form in the Oral History Archive maintained by KARTA and the History Meeting House.²⁹ The same location also houses the collection of accounts from the Eastern Archives, along with interviews with former female inmates of Ravensbrück, with Polish and German pre-war dwellers of the Kashubian commune of Stara Kiszewa/Alt Kischau (where the war experience is central), and with Polish and German inhabitants of Krzyż Wielkopolski (until 1945, the German town of Kreuz). The Oral History Archive also contains interviews with prisoners of 'forgotten' concentration camps – those that are absent in the collective memory – as well as with Poles living in the *Kresy*, the Eastern Borderland area, which was formerly the eastern region of Poland and is today divided up between Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine and Russia. In 2005–6, the Polish contribution to the aforementioned International Slave and Forced Labourers Documentation Project was carried out by KARTA. The above is a general indication of the centre's main projects over the last few years.

In addition to the KARTA Centre and the History Meeting House, there are several other institutions in Poland that are active in collecting and archiving oral testimonies. The most important are: Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN of Lublin; the Pogranicze Centre in Sejny; the Lublin Radio Oral History Studio; the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising; the EFKA Foundation of Krakow; the Polish branch office of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; and Centropa (i.e. the Central Europe Centre for Research and Documentation), an initiative that aims to document the history of Central European Jewry through oral history accounts. Recently, a number of new institutions have joined the list, such as the Centre for Civic Education (accounts of Poles who rescued Jews during the German Occupation, recorded by young people); the Christian Association of Auschwitz Families (the Auschwitz Memento project, with video accounts of former Polish inmates of Auschwitz); the Museum of the History of Polish Jews; and the Museum of the Warsaw Borough of Praga. The National Remembrance Institute (IPN) also films oral history interviews. Again, the list is incomplete; it would be impossible to compile a full one, as it is continuously expanding, almost month-by-month, with a number of initiatives being only at a local or niche level.

In November 2007, a conference focused entirely on oral history, entitled 'Oral History – the Art of Dialogue', was held for the first time in Poland. The organisers

29 The Oral History Archive (*Archiwum Historii Mówionej*) is a joint venture between two institutions: KARTA, a non-governmental organisation, and the History Meeting House (DSH), a cultural institution run by the Capital City of Warsaw. Today, some 5,000 biographical interviews are housed in the Archive. The Archive's emblem is the website audiohistoria.pl.

included: the Institute of History of the Faculty of History, Jagiellonian University, Krakow; the scholarly periodical *Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne*; and the Artefakty Association. This institutional, strongly history-oriented context can be somewhat misleading, as traditional historians were definitely a minority at the conference. Papers were delivered by sociologists, anthropologists, ethnologists, political scientists, and psychologists. Alessandro Portelli and Charles Hardy were the special guests. Thus, openness and an interdisciplinary character were the event's great assets. The term 'oral history' enabled scholars from various disciplines, scientific fields and countries to meet, talk, and understand one another.

The next step towards the institutionalisation of oral history in Poland was the establishment in 2009 of the Polish Oral History Association, in an attempt to integrate individuals and institutions active in the field, and to create a space for the exchange of knowledge, experiences and ideas. The Association organises annual conferences as well as various workshops and training in oral history interviewing techniques. Since 2011, the Wrocław-based 'Memory and Future' Centre (Ośrodek „Pamięć i Przyszłość“) has published the peer-reviewed scholarly periodical *Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej*, which is gradually becoming the most important publishing platform for Polish scholars using the method – and not only, or even not primarily, historians.

In autumn 2014 the *Genealogies of Memory*³⁰ conference took place in Warsaw for the fourth time. This key annual academic event East-Central Europe in the field of memory studies, broadly understood, was this time subtitled 'Collective vs. Collected Memories. 1989–91 from an Oral History Perspective'. German oral historians were strongly represented at this event – conference participants could listen to Dorothee Wierling, Alexander von Plato, and the special conference guest, Lutz Niethammer. All these names need no explanation for anyone familiar with the European oral history tradition. I mention them just to show that we are 'part of the game'.

Less than a year later, in late summer 2015, the Polish Oral History Association together with the Institute of Sociology of the University of Łódź – the leading academic institution in Poland for biographical research in the social sciences – organised an international conference entitled 'Oral History in Central-Eastern Europe: Current Research Areas, Challenges and Specificity', which gathered almost seventy scholars, mostly from Poland, Ukraine and the Czech Republic, but also with representatives from Belarus, Germany, the United States, Great Britain and the Netherlands. Keynote lectures were given by Alexander von Plato and Miroslav Vaněk, both former Presidents of the International Oral History Association.

30 The conference *Genealogies of Memory* has been organised yearly since 2011 by the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity and the Institute of Sociology, Warsaw University in cooperation with the Bundesinstitut für Kultur und Geschichte der Deutschen im östlichen Europa and Freie Universität Berlin.

These are just few of the most visible examples indicating the increasing popularity and importance of oral history in Poland – and Polish academia in particular. Still, however, despite all this undeniable successes, and despite the increasing number of academic and popular publications based on this research method, oral history is hardly accepted as a fully legitimate research method within the historical profession.

2 Concentration camp experiences in Polish sociological analyses: State-of-the-art in research, methodological issues, and research perspective adopted in this study

This study is about concentration camp experiences as read in the histories of the narrators' lives and analysed through their biographical narrations. These narratives were produced in interview situations and have been audio or video recorded, and subsequently transcribed. This is, I believe, a legitimate reminder: it is worth emphasising once again that my analysis does not focus primarily on an actually existing Nazi concentration camp, specifically Mauthausen, and its numerous subcamps. The present focus is neither on some generalised, abstracted totalitarian institution of the concentration camp (colloquially named '*kacet*' in these narratives – from the German *Konzentrationslager*, abbr. KZ; an equivalent of the more international '*Lager*'), although I make a number of references to this (and other) categories constructed and used by Erving Goffman.

At the centre of my interest is the camp experience of each of my Interviewees as he or she has interpreted it and the way he or she evokes it in a (relatively) unrestrainedly constructed entire biographical story. On a par with experiences of the 'there and then', of significance to me are their interpretations as well as the narrative and situational context in which the memory of those experiences is harnessed for processing in the 'here and now'.

There are countless camp experiences. Each Interviewee and every single prisoner had their own unique camp experiences (and today there are unique stories about them): unique, simply because they are their own, individual, unrepeatable, and have been (or still are) mulled over in their individual memories. Or, they have been pushed into oblivion. Of the several months or years of an individual's time at the *kacet*, only some events are recalled on each occasion, although it also happens that every recollection recalls the same, strongly fixed images: either selected to be evoked in a given situation, or those that no one has chosen but which stubbornly reappear, albeit unwanted. Although there are a number of experiences and images, they tend to be consolidated within a single dominant interpretation.

This uniqueness and unrepeatability of individual camp experiences (and not just camp experiences) is perceptible from an existential perspective, so to speak. One cannot stop at this level, however, if we are to understand and interpret not only the fate of an individual but also certain social mechanisms with which it is entangled and within which individual and collective memory functions. But

social things can be traced in two different ways. These two basic paths, two main paradigms, are quantitative and qualitative research.

My analyses are primarily based on narrative biographical interviews with former concentration camp inmates, which I recorded as part of the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project. My central empirical basis is the thirty accounts I recorded, each running several hours, along with selected interviews carried out by my colleagues. Reference is also made to a number of other interviews I did with former concentration camp inmates during my later involvement with the KARTA Centre, as part of its Oral History programme. My data are thus qualitative. This is true not only for the data: the qualitative and the interpretative approach, being the paradigm upon which my action is based.³¹ I seek the meanings and interpretations of the experiences related to imprisonment in the concentration camp, as related by former inmates in their oral autobiographical narrations constructed almost sixty years after they left the *kacet*.

In analysing these autobiographical accounts, my aim is never to ignore the underlying experience of the time in the camp. My Interviewees were indeed there – and spent a few months, a year or several years there. The places they were imprisoned and suffered in really did exist. The material traces of some still remain, whilst other have been completely effaced, their materiality annihilated. They only remain sites of memory or in memory, individual and collective. Why is this an important reminder for me? I navigate the audio and video recordings, and interview transcriptions, (being) produced ‘here and now’, and thus being narrative constructions. But these constructions are re-constructions at the same time, as they refer us back to the real experiences. This is not to say that I approach them as historical sources, enabling us to cognise the objective reality. It is to say, however, that I am interested not just in the text (voice/image) but also in the ‘off-the-text’ social reality, which is subjectively experienced, organised, and interpreted by my Interlocutors. I have no direct access to it; my access is mediated and filtered in multiple ways – by (*inter alia*) later experiences, collective memory, the interview as interaction and, perhaps most importantly, by language. In other words, my question concerns the story’s content – thus being ‘what’ of the story (*what* is being recounted?); and, the very action of telling the story, building the narration – the question of ‘how’ of the story (*how* is it recounted/interpreted?).

Such an approach to the collected research material suggests that I should take a different angle from that used by Anna Pawełczyńska in her study *Wartości a przemoc. Zarys socjologicznej problematyki Oświęcimia* [‘The values and violence. An outline of the sociological issues of Auschwitz’]. The fact that my Interlocutors were once imprisoned at Mauthausen and not Auschwitz is completely irrelevant

31 Qualitative data and their collecting techniques do not yet constitute a paradigm. The paradigm is primarily based upon the philosophical assumptions concerning social reality. Cf. K. Konecki, *Studia z metodologii badań jakościowych. Teoria ugruntowana*, Warszawa, 2000, pp. 16–23.

here (incidentally, many were taken to Mauthausen after having earlier been interned at Auschwitz or Birkenau). The point is that the Pawelczyńska study shows the concentration camp universe as an objective social (and historical) reality. Pawelczyńska knows this all too well through her personal experience: she was a Birkenau inmate herself, who attentively observed the reality she had been thrown into. Her book's central subject is the prisoner community, relations between the inmates, how they were differentiated and how unequal their chances of survival were, as well as, as the title heralds, the values and violence of the camp world. The construction of this study is very different from the numerous autobiographical stories of other former Auschwitz inmates, of either sex, including female camp mates³² – and this was a deliberate and thoroughly considered aim:

It took thirty years to gain a perspective. It is this historical distance, a long time in which to reflect, and the serenity of impending old age that have enabled me to view the concentration camp with unbiased categories. ...

It is not an easy task to apply a scholarly apparatus to a difficult period of one's own biography. I have endeavoured to select and put in order, in a perhaps impersonal manner, such phenomena and their regularity as could be helpful in explaining the mechanisms of the concentration camp. Both the mechanisms that led to the existence of the camps, in their specific form, as well as those that enabled some of the inmates to survive.³³

In her selection and ordering of phenomena and their reciprocal regularities, Pawelczyńska does not refer to the memories or accounts of or interviews with former inmates. The footnotes contained in her study point, rather, to a number of essays, monographs and studies. These include articles and research papers by the Krakow-based psychiatric team directed by Professor Antoni Kępiński. Pawelczyńska consistently avoids the subjective and evoking survivors' narratives. She makes a great effort to maintain a distance and stay objective. This is also true for her camp experiences, to which she makes no direct reference, although they must have been the main, or at least an important, incentive behind her study.

Pawelczyńska's book is perhaps the best and best-known sociological study on concentration camps in Polish scholarly literature.³⁴ Among the lesser known and

32 Characteristically, Anna Pawelczyńska has never published her camp recollections. Fragments of the 'records' made in the first months after her return to her home town of Pruszków in 1945 were published only in 2003 ('Wieniec z kolczastego drutu', *Pro Memoria*, no. 17/18).

33 A. Pawelczyńska, *Wartości a przemoc. Zarys socjologicznej problematyki Oświęcimia*, Lublin, 2004, p. 9.

34 In the German literature, the classical sociological study dealing with the reality of Nazi concentration camps – based, for once, mainly on accounts of former inmates – is: W. Sofsky, *Die Ordnung des Terrors: Das Konzentrationslager*. Published in 1993 and awarded the prestigious Geschwister-Scholl-Preis, this book has been reprinted several times since.

rarer quoted works that aim to describe the psychological mechanisms of the camp universe, two doctoral theses are worth mentioning: Marek Tadeusz Frankowski's *Socjologiczne aspekty funkcjonowania hitlerowskich obozów koncentracyjnych 1939-1945* ['The sociological aspects of the functioning of Nazi concentration camps, 1939-45'], published in 1996 by the Central Commission for Research on Crimes Against the Polish Nation – the Institute of National Remembrance,³⁵ and Kazimierz Godorowski's *Psychologia i psychopatia hitlerowskich obozów koncentracyjnych. Próba analizy postaw i zachowań w warunkach ekstremalnych obciążeń* ['The psychology and psychopathy of Nazi concentration camps. An attempt at analysis of the attitudes and behaviours under extreme charge conditions'], published by the Academy of Catholic Theology (Akademia Teologii Katolickiej), Warsaw, in 1985. Both authors willingly refer to Anna Pawełczyńska's book – not only directly, through the quotations in the footnotes, but also indirectly, by assuming a similar, objectivising approach. This is particularly apparent in Frankowski's study, where we read in the introduction:

Objectivism is indispensable, for tendencies have surfaced that disseminate delusory and consciously false ideas. ...

It is the author's intent that this study presents a sociological profile of the concentration camp community, multi-plane structure, mechanisms of functioning, as well as the interdependencies and social engineering techniques applied with respect to the inmates.

In contrast with a number of valuable publications, where the perception of the camp is that of the individual prisoner – a victim crammed onto the wheels of violence – the task of this study is to show the problems related to the concentration camp as an element of the system:

- (i) from the standpoint of the purposes, strivings, and targets of those who developed the camps;
- (ii) from the standpoint of the victims – a specific community, with graspable interdependencies and internal structure

This study is, as may be expected, an opportunity to show a panoramic view of the concentration camp, its various hierarchical levels, interdependencies, and structures.³⁶

35 This study was republished in 2003, with minor supplements and a new historical chapter on the structure of Nazi camps in Polish lands, under the title *Ludzie i bestie. Socjologiczne stadium mikrostruktur społecznych niemieckiego obozu koncentracyjnego* ['Humans and beasts. A sociological study of social microstructures of German concentration camp']. Only the first part of the title is featured on the cover, most probably for marketing reasons. Two photographs of a camp ramp have been included.

36 M.T. Frankowski, *Socjologiczne aspekty funkcjonowania hitlerowskich obozów koncentracyjnych 1939-1945*, Warszawa, 1996, p. 6.

The author's declared objectivism, his systemic and 'panoramic view', are confirmed by the bibliography and footnotes. Among the several hundred references to scholarly studies, published prisoners' reminiscences are rare. In most cases where quotes from prisoners do appear, the authors comment as researchers in the camp area: in a 'scientific', 'objective' fashion. Hence, there is no trace of an interview with a survivor (or of a survivor having been interviewed). Sociological aspects of the camp's functioning are described without using redundant, subjective, emotional elements. The author has been able to maintain the desired distance. As we read the subsequent chapters, our view of the *kacety* becomes increasingly 'panoramic', its image growing increasingly distant. Having waded through the numerous breakdowns, calculations, divisions and classifications, all meant to describe and clarify the various camp mechanisms, structures, and hierarchies, we close the book finding ourselves enriched with new knowledge but convinced that there is nothing that links us with the social universe of the *kacety*, a detailed description of which we have just read, and the rules governing it having little to do with those known to us from our daily experiences. This monograph reassures our sense of security and reinforces the comfortable presumption that the concentration camp is a very distant island, full of people unlike ourselves and of inhuman beasts.

Kazimierz Godorowski has analysed the attitudes and behaviours of concentration camp prisoners from a psychological perspective, specifically from the viewpoint of social psychology. This author also endeavours to create an objective picture of the reality he describes. However, he is much more cautious in constructing his classifications, breakdowns and typologies and far less convinced that his effort to render the truth of the *kacety* has produced a satisfactory result. In any case, he acknowledges that he must face certain important methodological questions:

One should, however, talk of the psychology of an inmate, rather than inmates, since it seems that referring globally to an 'inmate psychology' in concentration camps risks dangerously simplifying the issue. The thing is, there were various categories of camp....

All this means that the living conditions were quite varied between individual camps and for the different categories of inmates. Reducing them to a common denominator of 'inmate psychology' would be erroneous. Below, I will try and propose a classification of attitudes and responses to the camp reality. I am well aware of the ensuing difficulties, be it in the methodological aspects.³⁷

The cautiousness shown by this author in formulating statements on the psychological and sociological rights of the camp reality is related to the empirical

37 K. Godorowski, *Psychologia i psychopatia hitlerowskich obozów koncentracyjnych. Próba analizy postaw i zachowań w warunkach ekstremalnych obciążeń*, Warszawa, 1985, p. 12.

approach upon which Godorowski based his analyses. He writes of the methods used in his work thus:

This study is based on:

1. An analysis of the reminiscences of former inmates of concentration camps.
2. Documents and publications comprising and discussing the basic assumptions of the Hitlerist system....
3. An analysis of the existing scholarly studies concerning the specified aspects of living in the camps, including psychological, sociological, medical, historical, and ethical aspects.
4. The author's participant observation from the period of his stay at the Gross-Rosen concentration camp and its affiliated unit of Landshut (today, Kamienna-Góra).³⁸

The first and the last item are especially worth noting. It is significant that the reading of camp memoirs and the author's own personal camp experience somehow inhibit his self-confidence when it comes to formulating generalised statements, rather than eliciting statements claiming the need to remain unbiased. Instead of distance and a 'panoramic view', we face here a multitude of psychological and social processes occurring in the camp reality.

In spite of the substantial differences, the two studies have much in common. Although not to the same extent, both are ultimately part of the current of objectivising, scholarly analyses of the camp universe. The *kaczet* world is approached as a certain harsh reality which proves to be cognisable and describable. Similarly to most historical studies, the problems of presenting and representing, the complex and unobvious interdependencies between reality and how it is narrated, are for the most part neglected. Jerzy Topolski has written many times about this shortcoming, his remarks referring specifically to studies by historians. They also appear to apply to researchers of social reality in general:

Is it not the case, perhaps, that there is the past (though long gone), on the one hand, whilst on the other, there are all those, historians included, who are willing to say or write something about that past, and so they do. Such has been the belief over the centuries, and has remained so in many cases. But the reality ... is otherwise, because historians do not investigate the past as something external to them, ready to be examined, or waiting for them; instead, when researching the past, they create its narrative image from the very beginning. It is not, however, a portrayal of something that is at least partly known in its original shape, but a construction of the metaphorical image, which is controlled through knowledge of the method and, first of all, through the other narrative images.³⁹

When reading these concentration camp studies, my attention is drawn to something other than the blurred distinction between reality and its narrative image,

38 Ibidem, p. 14.

39 J. Topolski, *Wprowadzenie do historii*, Poznań, 2006, pp. 11–12.

although it is strictly correlated with it. In this objectivising, positivistic, or normative take of a social reality – even if its image emerges from the accounts of its participants – there is little (if any) room left for acquainting the reader with the accounts of people who contributed to that reality: who brought it into being, participated in its various dimensions, interpreted it, and accorded senses and meanings to it. If the perspective of the social actors – as sociologists sometimes call the individuals involved – is taken into account in these works, then it is done mainly with an illustrative purpose, if not an explicitly decorative one, to strengthen the scholarly arguments of the expert researcher and to make the study easier and more pleasant to read.

Fortunately, a parallel current is flowing through the social sciences which allows these social actors to speak and, moreover, for their voices to form the basis for any further analyses. The uniqueness of this current is its mediatory status, which is often strongly emphasised: we have no access to the social reality other than through the meanings given to this reality by its actors.

This qualitative and interpretative current has a strong tradition in Polish sociology, while, in turn, it makes copious references to Polish sociology and, especially, the work of Florian Znaniecki and his *humanistic coefficient* concept. Nonetheless, this current is not limited to sociological tradition but is today also superbly represented in areas such as biographical studies. These studies – as if naturally, by the power of history – often refer to wartime experiences, in particular, the extreme experiences of those who survived the Holocaust. The studies of Małgorzata Melchior and Barbara Engelking are particularly important examples of this research current.

However, within the interpretative approach, there has been no observant, close-up focus on the experience of imprisonment in concentration camps. The immensity of *Lager*-related literature, including scholarly studies such as the representative examples I have mentioned, along with the hundreds of published volumes of memoirs (as well as analyses of these memoirs as historical sources or literary texts⁴⁰), appear to have long ago exhausted the matter. Its overuse, if not

40 Worth noting here is a Master's thesis by B. Krupa, *Wspomnienia obozowe jako specyficzna odmiana pisarstwa historycznego* ['Concentration-camp memoirs as a specific variety of historical penmanship'], Kraków, 2006. It analyses Auschwitz memoirs published in Poland, and challenges the criticism of sources, in its classical form, deeming it "helpless in face of camp memoirs" (p. 1.). Although the author speaks as a historian (if my understanding is correct), it is the literary narrative, rather than the world outside it, that is central to his interests: "I am not particularly concerned when I see that certain facts of essence to a camp historian might be missing in this picture; of importance to me are the facts that inform the person writing. It is the author's original experience of the camp, rather than a reality beyond the text, that is fundamental to me. ... It hence follows that I should carefully considered, first of all, the narrative, rather than look for facts outside of it. In other words, what I am offering is a style of reading camp memoirs which is dissimilar to the one practiced so far." (pp. 76–77).

wear-and-tear, in Polish historiography before 1989 is also a contributing factor. It is no surprise, therefore, that other subjects (and other biographies) – particularly the ‘neglected’ ones, of which there were quite a number before 1989 – now tend more strongly to attract the attention of researchers who apply a qualitative/interpretative approach.

Nonetheless, I would like to do justice to the study by Alicja Rokuszewska-Pawełek, *Chaos i przymus. Trajektorie wojenne Polaków – analiza biograficzna* [‘Chaos and coercion. The wartime trajectories of Poles: a biographical analysis’], to which I have already referred several times. In her analysis of various wartime trajectories, this author takes account of the camp experience of necessity. However, in a study wherein one half consists of theoretical considerations and the empirical section of which covers a number of diverse Occupation-time experiences, she was able to dedicate only a few pages to it (about 15, out of 200 pages), remarking only on its major traits. Her general conclusions are based on just three biographical interviews with former inmates.

Similarly, Barbara Engelking’s *Holocaust and Memory*, a book about Shoah survivors, merely touches upon the camp experience, although it was shared by as many as six of the twenty-two of her interviewees. Hers is a considered and well-grounded research strategy:

The third model of wartime experience that I have distinguished is that of the concentration camp. Even though this theme is probably the best-known and interpreted exemplum of totalitarianism, it remains one of the greatest intellectual challenges of our century.

I will not discuss the issue of camps in detail. This problem is outside of my areas of interest, and this for several reasons – one being the fact that it has already been profoundly recognised and described. I have not asked my Interlocutors (those who had been there) to describe in a detailed manner their experiences in the concentration camps.⁴¹

Krzysztof Konecki’s important article *Jaźń w totalnej instytucji obozu koncentracyjnego* [‘The self in the totalitarian institution of concentration camp’]⁴² should be mentioned here. This important essay describes camp experiences using the categories proposed by Goffman, particularly in his essays on totalitarian institutions published in *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. The author points to a few important features that distinguish the camp experience from the experience of other totalitarian institutions. The singularity of the camp is emphasised very strongly: “In his concept of totalitarian institutions, E. Goffman loses the ‘unique specificity’ of existence of the self in concentration camp institutions. According to Goffman, the various totalitarian

41 B. Engelking, op. cit., pp. 58.

42 K. Konecki, ‘Jaźń w totalnej instytucji obozu koncentracyjnego’, *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 1985, no. 3.

institutions, for instance, monasteries and prisons, offer similar interactive patterns. Our present argument for the ‘unique specificity’ of the existence of the self concerns each particular totalitarian institution”. Konecki dwells on what has completely escaped Goffman’s notice: an analysis of the situation of transference from one camp to another. Unfortunately, this essay has remained an initial effort; neither its author nor any other author has undertaken to follow it up and add to it. All the same, it offers a significant approach by qualitative sociology (in its symbolist-interactionist version) to the concentration camp reality, one that proposes a completely different view on the issue, when compared to the version dominant in the studies of Pawełczyńska or Frankowski. This perspective is close to my own, and is an important inspiration for me. Yet, there is one important point where my epistemological assumptions divert from those taken by Konecki.

The source material used for the present analyses consists of memoirs of concentration camp prisoners, published in this country. ... The memoirs, as the source for our present analyses, have been accepted without much objection, as far as the veracity of the facts they contain is concerned. The concrete facts, occurrences, situations are of interest to us owing not to their ‘historical authenticity’ but in terms of typicality, that is, repeatability, of certain strategies of action as shown in a number of memoirist accounts. The repeatability of certain strategies of action may testify to their social significance.⁴³

The basic difference does not lie in the fact that Konecki analyses memoirs (or rather, quotes and uses them to illustrate his argument) whereas I am concerned with oral narratives. The point is that Konecki is not interested in story-constructing processes, narrative strategies, ways of presenting things or – quite obviously, since his argument is based on published memories – the interaction inherent in the interview/account/testimony process. The texts he analyses refer him directly to the *kaceta*’s social reality as mirrored in the selves of the inmates. “In presenting the typical techniques of an individual’s operation, this article shows the ways in which the ‘rank-and-file’ concentration-camp prisoner negotiated his self-concepts.” Contrary to Konecki, I attempt to recognise and take into account at least some of the filters separating me (and my Interviewees) from the ‘there-and-then’ of the camp. This important difference is probably also rooted in the fact I have been strongly personally involved in making the recordings of the narratives (or, evoking the sources, in the terminology of historians). My intense memory of my own participation in the interviews, understood as interaction, and, thereby, of my own contribution to the stories, focuses my attention also on the construction processes neglected by Konecki.

In addition to these works, Antoni Kępiński’s essays on camp issues, first published as articles in the medical journal *Przegląd Lekarski* and elsewhere and then

43 Ibidem.

collected and edited as *Rytm życia* (several reprints; last ed.: Kraków, 2007) and *Refleksje oświęcimskie* (Kraków, 2005), hold a special position. A psychiatrist by profession, Kępiński had been a prisoner at a little-known concentration camp at Miranda de Ebro in Spain, modelled after the Nazi KZs. This is a little-known fact, as he rarely mentioned it. Still, his works on the subject are neither highly specialised medical studies nor the personal recollections of a survivor. They are, rather, essays written by a humanist who, disregarding the conventional borders of scholarly disciplines, touches upon philosophical, anthropological, sociological, ethical and – as we might expect – psychological and psychiatric problems related to the functioning of camps. What he proposes is not really a reflection on the concentration camp but on the situation of the ‘man thrown into the camp’, and his internal and external experience there; his camp ‘hell’ as well as ‘heaven’ (both metaphors were used by Kępiński). And, on the deep effects of this experience, which are again seen as manifold and human: psychiatric, psychological, social,...

Some of the best-known studies by Kępiński are on the ‘KZ syndrome’, which he approached as a separate disease. He initiated research into this area, which was continued by Krakow-based psychiatrists and other specialists for a number of years. Their studies have made a major contribution to the annual special edition of the journal *Przegląd Lekarski*, titled *Oświęcim* and published between 1962 and 1991 (with thirty-one volumes in total). Examinations of former Auschwitz inmates, along with personal meetings with them, formed the basis for the interdisciplinary studies.

Along with Pawełczyńska’s study, Kępiński’s publications, hard to classify unambiguously, are, in a sense, the classic works of Polish scholarly literature on KZ issues. They have also been an important inspiration for me in writing this book. Not so much on the level of detailed analysis but, rather, as a way of seeing the camp experiences of survivors, and the related interpretative direction they offer. Instead, therefore, of individual footnotes referring to specific works by Kępiński, let me quote just a single fragment, which sets the direction for my work.

He who entered the camp had to be destroyed and had to cease being the person he had been before then. He became a number, but then took on some tiny function in that enormous camp apparatus. It seems to me that, in a sense, everybody was a functional prisoner, even if one’s activities were confined to tidying the camp, moving the stones, he still performed some function in the camp, was included in its total apparatus. I do not consider that a sharp distinction between the ‘functional’ and ‘non-functional’ is correct.⁴⁴

If my observation that there is no in-depth interpretive study on the concentration camp experience is legitimate, then, with the research material at my disposal,

44 Quoted after: ‘Więźniowie funkcyjni w hitlerowskich obozach koncentracyjnych (Dyskusja)’, *Przegląd Lekarski*, 1968, no. 1, p. 257.

I should make the effort to fill the gap. However, a difficult question immediately arises, one that is apparent to any qualitative researcher: How is it to be done? This question appears particularly acute to those researchers who, like me, work alone. How to cope with the thousands of pieces of paper with the transcribed texts of interviews? And how, later, to master the dozens of hours of audio and video recordings which, for me, are the actual research material, the transcriptions merely being guides to them?

It seems that Hanna Palska is right in calling the categories of *humanistic coefficient* and qualitative analysis of content, so willingly evoked by qualitative sociologists, the key notions and spells which we do not, however, find quite so helpful for resolving 'methodological uncertainty'. This task we have to handle on our own, "each time defining our own procedures of text interpretation and seeking a strong theoretical basis, as is done in many cases". If these proposed solutions are not quite applicable, or it is not certain that they (these particular solutions) should be applied, we have no alternative but to define our own path between the extremes: a postmodernist methodological anarchism, on the one hand, and the rigorousness and formalism of certain concepts classed as symbolic interactionism.⁴⁵

This methodological self-determination is not exclusively a rational choice. It is something more, at least on certain occasions: a research intuition, which is hard to name precisely. This is especially so when the researcher who has contributed to the material – having entered into direct, subjective relationships with the individuals being studied – is also the one who interprets the empirical material he or she has collected. This is my situation. To deal later with interview transcripts and, subsequently, fragments of them, may facilitate finding a solution to the 'problem' and gaining the necessary distance. Yet, the 'problem' is a stubbornly recurring one – each time we hear the voice of our interlocutors (and our own voice) recorded on an audiotape or CD. This reappearance is even more powerful when we can see their faces on video or DVD. As Daniel Bertaux, the sophisticated biographical researcher, says: "When [the sociologist] has a say in the selection of method, the decision will depend more on deep inclinations rather than rational considerations. And this is very good, for in order to execute decent research work, you should first be willing to do so. Passion is the engine of discovery."⁴⁶

If I had studied the history of the concentration camp of Mauthausen, or written a sociological analysis of the KZ as an external, closed and distant reality – as Anna Pawełczyńska once excellently did, her imitators having been much less excellent – I would probably have found it easier to escape the state of 'methodological

45 Cf. H. Palska, *Bieda i dostatek. O nowych stylach życia w Polsce końca lat dziewięćdziesiątych*, Warszawa, 2002, pp. 37–40.

46 Translated after the Polish version: D. Bertaux, 'Funkcje wypowiedzi autobiograficznych w procesie badawczym', in J. Włodarek, M. Ziółkowski (eds.), *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii*, Warszawa – Poznań, 1990, p. 71.

uncertainty'; provided, that is, that I had experienced it. Conceivably, I would have found any methodological issues so transparent that I would not have paid the slightest attention to them. But this is not the case; my perspective is different. Not only do I take into consideration the interpretations of the persons being examined but I actually place these interpretations at the centre of my investigation. And it is only through them, to the extent that it is feasible, that I endeavour to perceive the reality of my Interlocutors' experiences. I do believe this reality exists. I do not believe it might be attainable outside of their interpretation. These interpretations are not offered to me directly but through the language, in the interview situation, through interaction.

When referring to the metaphysics of presence, Norman Denzin states that there is no clean window through which one might see into a man's internal life, as our vision is always filtered by the language, signs, and meaning-giving processes. Language, be it written or oral, always proves unstable, open-ended, built from traces of other signs, of symbols (this being particularly true for its oral form). Having noticed this, Denzin immediately emphasises his attachment to the position whereby interpretative sociologists and anthropologists research into real people who have real-life experiences in a social world.⁴⁷ Denzin further adds that the central demand in the biographical method (and in his own book) is the assumption that a real person exists 'somewhere out there, outside', and lives his or her real life. Such a real individual was once born and might now be dead, but they have left a trace in the lives of other people, and may have deeply felt and experienced human emotions: shame, love, hatred, anger, despair. This sensing, thinking, breathing person stands at the centre of the biographical method.⁴⁸

The interviews I have recorded are narrative and biographical. It is important to me that both these traits do not disappear from my interpretations and analyses, and that they are always placed at their centre. How is this achieved? This is not an easy task at all. When discussing his research experience during a large oral history project which resulted, among many other things, in his important book *The Edwardians*, based on 100 (of 450) interviews, Paul Thompson speaks of the conflict the researcher is faced with. He calls it a conflict between cross-analysis and entire stories. "Once you knew a whole interview, somehow you wanted to have that whole person there [in the text], that you always feel".⁴⁹ He extricated himself from this by inserting in the book, which was meant to tell the social history of England in the Edwardian period, analyses of entire biographical accounts, quoting from them extensively. He included, moreover, analyses of a few portraits of his interviewees and their families. In his best known study, *The Voice of the Past*,

47 N.K. Denzin, *Interpretive biography*, Newbury Park – London – New Delhi, 1989, p. 14.

48 *Ibidem*, p. 22.

49 P. Thompson, *Life story interview with Karen Worcman*, June 1996; available at: <http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/online/data/edwardians/biography/PaulThompsonLifeStoryInterview1996.pdf>.

Thompson discerns four basic methods for interpreting the recorded interviews: (i) presenting a single biographical story and analysing it in a broader historical and social context; (ii) presenting a collection of stories and grouping them around specified topics. As an excellent example of this approach, Thompson mentions Oscar Lewis's study *The Children of Sanchez*, in which juxtaposed narratives of parents and children from one family help build a multidimensional picture; (iii) narrative analysis, extending in most cases to a single interview or, in some cases, a group of interviews. The researcher focuses on the interview/account (narrative) itself, as a spoken text, the language, subjects touched upon, repetitions, concealments, silence; the focus is on what the narrator has experienced, remembered, and how they have recounted it. This analysis rarely aims at showing a typicality of the narrator or their experiences; (iv) reconstructing cross-analysis, approaching oral accounts as the basis for constructing an argument on the patterns of behaviours, developments, and processes in the past. Thompson also remarks that it is possible within one book to merge his own expanded analyses with a presentation of fuller biographical stories.⁵⁰ *The Edwardians* is an example of such a combination, after all.

Thompson's third option is the one closest to my own approach (although I come to it through the fourth). Approaching the biographical story as a narrative rather than a reconstruction best harmonises with this approach. This is an initial self-determination, worth developing and complementing. All the more so given that Thompson's argument is devised as an introduction and incentive to use oral history narratives for historians, rather than sociologists.⁵¹

The narrative approach to biographical accounts is a common term used for various interpretive practices. These include traditional literary criticism and thoughts on autobiography as a literary genre, which shed light on the interrelations between the form and the content of the story; between the way the narrative is built and its actual content. Alessandro Portelli, the classic author of oral history quoted by Thompson and who tends toward a more interpretative current, states outright that oral accounts not only comprise a variety of literary genres but themselves constitute a separate genre which we should comprehend: "The life story as a full, coherent oral narrative does not exist in nature; it is a synthetic product of social science—but no less precious for that."⁵² This offers an important complement to Philippe Lejeune's studies on the various genres and forms of autobiography. Luisa Passerini's studies, analysing interviews with workers of the Fiat factory in Turin, offer her own literary specialist – or, more specifically, 'genre specialist' – considerations. Comparing the various autobiographical (and biographical) narratives of a single individual, which have been compiled at different times and under different circumstances, is an interesting variation of such an analysis.

50 Cf. P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, Oxford, 2000, pp. 269–271.

51 *Ibidem*.

52 Quoted after: *ibidem*, p. 276.

The study entitled *Sprechen als Last und Befreiung* by Friedrich Boll, a professor of modern history at the University of Bonn, is a good example of this kind of study.⁵³

In qualitative sociology, an interpretative – or, narrative – approach to biographical accounts is represented by scholars such as Fritz Schütze, Catherine Riessman, and Gabriele Rosenthal. In criticising this biographical research current, Daniel Bertaux calls it a ‘narrativist current’ and sets it against his own, realistic approach, which, to his mind, is predominant among French scholars, who tend to focus on the socio-historical and macro-social reality that exists independently of the subjects being investigated. Negating these charges, G. Rosenthal emphasises that subjective meanings are not purely individual and psychological but are always socially constituted and form part of the constitution of the social universe – the fact Bertaux neglects, in Rosenthal’s opinion.⁵⁴

Although I am more sympathetic to the German than the French school, I feel such a strong contraposition of the two stances is overly exaggerated. Paul Thompson presents a less strict juxtaposition. This representative of the realistic approach (which he prefers to describe as ‘reconstructive’⁵⁵) admits that he has many constructivist inspirations, which have modified his positivist stance although he has never wavered from it. This evolution can be seen in the three consecutive editions of his *The Voice of the Past*; particularly conspicuous is the difference between the first edition of 1978 and the second edition, which came out ten years later. It can immediately be seen in the Table of Contents, where there is an extensive chapter on ‘Memory and the Self’, on memory and identity. The third edition discusses at much more length the various narrativist approaches. Thompson is perfectly aware of how he has developed.⁵⁶

53 F. Boll, *Sprechen als Last und Befreiung. Holocaust-Überlebende und politisch Verfolgte zweier Diktaturen. Ein Beitrag zur deutsch-deutschen Erinnerungskultur*, Bonn, 2003. Of particular interest is Part 3, Chapter 2, which analyses the impact of the ‘spirit of the time’ on the content of various autobiographical works by Ludwig Gehm (including his post-war biography published after World War II, documentary footage from the 1980s, accounts from an earlier period, and an interview with Professor Boll). Before the war, Gehm was a Social Democrat activist and member of the anti-Nazi resistance. Imprisoned from 1936, he was kept, for example, in Buchenwald, then enlisted in the Wehrmacht, which he deserted to join the Greek partisans fighting against the Germans. After the war, he spent some time at a British camp in North Africa and, once back in Germany, became active again with the Social Democrat Party (SPD) in Frankfurt. The study excellently shows how the social contexts informed the content of an autobiography that was created and compiled in a defined historical moment, specific political situation, etc.

54 For an exhaustive discussion, see A. Rokuszewska-Pawełek, op. cit., pp. 40–43.

55 P. Thompson, *The Voice ...*, p. 286.

56 P. Thompson, *Life story ...*; also, see the introductions to the consecutive editions of his *The Voice of the Past* (all reprinted in the most recent edition, 2000).

I agree with a number of the assumptions of symbolic interactionism, and make use of the analytical categories elaborated along the lines of this approach, finding especially useful those proposed by Fritz Schütze's biographistic sociology. I also conduct narrative interviews in a manner that is close to what this method proposes. Having said this, I find myself unable to completely follow the direction it suggests. The main reason is that the consecutive, increasingly formalised and complicated steps of the analytical procedure, based on a well-established theory, call for an intense group effort. It is impossible to individually and within a reasonable timeframe analyse several dozen biographical interviews and bring the analysis to a conclusion – one where a theoretical model of the phenomenon under examination, or models explaining its development, are constructed.⁵⁷

However, it is not the excess of the amassed material that discourages me from consistently applying this analytical procedure in its entirety. I am not quite convinced that such an intense effort is necessary (there is no doubt about its being intense). I believe that comparable conclusions are attainable without applying such formalised procedures. Clearly, however, such 'softer' methods are less resistant to scholarly criticism, and less subject to sound and reliable verification. This is not to say that they are to be excluded, although I am not willing to abandon interactionist references.

Paul Thompson, whom I have referred to many times thus far, has not joined this current but remains open to its influence. He summarises his presentation of the various methods of narrative analysis thus:

Despite the variety of forms of narrative analysis, ranging from the literary to the sociological, from the formal to the poetic, from the inclusion to the exclusion of the interviewer, some possible to combine and others incompatible, they have one crucial quality in common. They force the reader to slow down and look closely at both the whole text and its details, its images, forms of language, themes, its manifest and latent meanings. Ultimately, perhaps the greatest strength of narrative analysis, whatever its precise form, is to encourage an acuter and more sensitive listening.⁵⁸

I consider this view sober, distanced, and wise. I would like my own analytical effort to be an example of such acute and sensitive listening, looking and reading – one where, following Denzin's recommendation, the meaning and/or sense will take primacy before the method, and, moreover, the meaning/sense and the method become one.⁵⁹ Such an analysis would not necessarily lead to building or verifying any specific theory. But, it does not have to set such a purpose for itself. Biographical studies can assume other forms as well. Apart from a comparative analysis of life stories, the purpose of which is to elaborate an established

57 A. Rokuszewska-Pawełek, op. cit., p. 61.

58 P. Thompson, *The Voice ...*, p. 286.

59 N.K. Denzin, *Reinterpretacja ...*, p. 55–58.

theory, Denzin identifies two other purposes: “(i) researching into narratives of a single life history; (ii) collecting life stories grouped around shared themes”.⁶⁰ Fritz Schütze also emphasises the possibility and the sense of presenting such typical biographies, on the grounds of his own analytical concept.⁶¹ Schütze is not narrow-minded: he allows for open-ended, incomplete, and selective use of the analytical procedures he proposes.

As part of his own approach, which he himself calls ‘ethnoscology’, Daniel Bertaux opts for biographical research based upon a ‘saturated’ set of (auto)biographies rather than individual cases. At the same time, he focuses on such instances, making a number of references to Oscar Lewis’s study (which he uses as a model):

First and foremost, once you have taken the trouble, you can find a whole repository of thoughts in autobiographical statements. What I naturally mean is the bright ‘strokes’ against the dark background of narration. Nonetheless, it often happens that, with such strokes as the point of departure, a sociological treatise is built. It can afterwards be elaborated in not a single way but in at least two ways. The first and classic way consists in assimilating such strokes and translating them into the language of sociology, thus blurring their origin; the researcher remains the only one to know where they have drawn their ideas from. The other way, more rarely frequented, consists, in contrast, in elaborating the entire narrative, the form of a story (the concrete pieces of the content must remain intact), so as to highlight the new pieces of information concerning the social phenomena. The interaction with the interviewee can provide the opportunity.

He quickly adds,

Why resort to such evasions, if one could write a regular tract? The simple answer is, due to the specific powerfulness of autobiographical story. ... Finally, an autobiography is a whole, which any sociological treatise focused on a given milieu ought to be.⁶²

Interestingly, Denzin also refers to Oscar Lewis, and classifies his classic *The children of Sanchez* as one of the varieties of the interpretive format in biographical studies, describing this variety as ‘from the subject point of view’. The other two interpretive approaches, in his concept, are: the sociological, psychological, anthropological interpretation of subject-produced autobiographies (without the researcher’s contribution); and making sense of an individual’s life. It is within this latter approach that he situates his own research on Alcoholics Anonymous. Denzin sets these interpretive ways against various objectivising approaches. Interestingly, he includes in the latter category both Bertaux’s ‘ethnoscology’ and ‘objective

60 Ibidem, p. 67.

61 After I.K. Helling, ‘Metoda badań biograficznych’, in *Metoda biograficzna* ..., p. 31.

62 Translated after the Polish version: D. Bertaux, op. cit., pp. 80–81.

hermeneutics' with its various versions (Oevermann's and Schütze's), although noting the specificities of each.⁶³

Thus, modern qualitative sociology does offer theoretical support for an analysis of individual autobiographies – particularly those resulting from the unrestrained narrative work of the individuals being researched. It is no longer necessary to refer each time to the autobiographies of Władek Wiśniewski or Władek Berkan, as included by Znaniecki and Thomas in their pioneering study and thereby introduced into the sociological literature. It is perhaps enough to note, particularly in the context of the earlier considerations of oral history and of archiving and reanalysing qualitative data, that these classic authors in the field of biographical research in sociology have preserved the integrity of their biographical data, whilst the authors of the texts they analysed are known by their names.⁶⁴

At this point, let us pass on to the concrete thing, closer to my research of the oral autobiographical narratives of former Nazi concentration camp prisoners. As has been said, Poland has, on the one hand, an enormous number of written recollections of survivors, published and unpublished and, on the other, a few sociological (or, more broadly, social science) analyses of the *kacet* universe. In-depth studies of concrete stories and specific cases are absent. By this I mean sociological or anthropological studies in which we could read their own meanings and which would build their own interpretations, going beyond an approach that sees them as (rather poor-quality) historical sources or even literary texts.

Mention should be made of two studies by foreign authors who have endeavoured to follow such a path. These are obviously not the only examples, but they are of special importance and inspiration to me. Each of these studies has a different way of approaching the single autobiographical account by the social researcher. One of the accounts is by Margareta Glas-Larsson, *Ich will reden. Tragik und Banalität des Überlebens in Theresienstadt und Auschwitz*, edited and with commentary by Gerhard Botz.⁶⁵ The first section, some 130-pages long, is Margareta's autobiographical story, as tape-recorded during a very long multi-session interview, transcribed and edited, and with the specific traits of the spoken language being maintained. Margareta, the narrator, was an inmate of Terezin and then of Auschwitz-Birkenau and her name appears on the cover as the author's name. The

63 N.K. Denzin, *Interpretive Biography*, pp. 53–59. For an exhaustive, and polemical, presentation of this classification in the Polish literature, see A. Rokuszczyńska-Pawelek, op. cit., pp. 28–43.

64 For more on this subject, see: E. Hałas, 'Biografia a orientacja symbolicznego interakcjonizmu', in *Metoda biograficzna ...*, p. 206.

65 M. Glas-Larsson, *Ich will reden. Tragik und Banalität des Überlebens in Theresienstadt und Auschwitz*, Wien, 1981. I have used the English edition: *I Want to Speak. The Tragedy and Banality of Survival in Terezin and Auschwitz*, transl. by L.A. Bangerter, Riverside, 1991.

following sixty pages are filled with extensive footnotes: the historian's reliable effort. In the next section, the third, titled *Survival in the Holocaust*, Gerhard Botz writes about the purposes and internal structure of the camp, the specificity of social relations at the women's hospital where Margareta worked, the socialisation and adaptation which facilitated survival, and the psychosocial mechanisms of the transformation of the former inmates' memories. All these analyses refer to the survivor's story throughout. While Gerhard Botz is a historian, his analysis freely crosses the limits of his discipline, particularly the borderline with sociology. It cannot be otherwise, since he follows his interlocutor's voice, never using her narration as a source of quotations or footnotes to his own argument.

The other source of my inspiration – which is even more important for me, as it is closer to my own research perspective – is Michael Pollak's *Die Grenzen des Sagbaren: Lebensgeschichte von KZ-Überlebenden als Augenzeugenberichte und als Identitätsarbeit*⁶⁶, from which I have already quoted. Its first part in particular deserves close attention. It contains an analysis of a single, one-hour-long interview the author made with Ruth A. (so named throughout), a Berlin Jewess and former Auschwitz-Birkenau prisoner. The recording, done as part of an oral history project, was analysed by a professional sociologist. But what kind of analysis was applied? 'Open-ended' is its simplest description. Pollak avoids getting attached to, or identified with, a single method, theory, or methodological concept; his perception of oral history utilises a combination of microsociology, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and Pierre Bourdieu's theories. He names his major inspirations, whilst not seeing this self-definition as binding. Referring once again to Denzin's conceptualisation, it can be said that Pollak gives primacy to the meaning, rather than method. In contrast with Botz, Pollak interprets his interviewee's narrative, incessantly intertwining the text of the interview with his own argument. The interview and its interpretation are mutually combined in a process of constant reciprocal reference, within which research hypotheses are built and tested. There is room to refer to the emotion generated by the interview situation as an exchange and interaction. As Pollak emphasises, rather than being about separating the researcher's subjectivity from the generalisations he formulates, an interpretation of the biographical account sheds light, as far as possible, on the entire research process, in all its complexity. Thus, the reader is encouraged to take a closer look at the process and its associated transformation of the subject researched (interviewee) and the researcher in their mutual interaction, and to join the process and continue it.⁶⁷ It should be added that the interviewee's account/story, the narrative heard by the researcher/interviewer, and the story

66 M. Pollak, op. cit. The German-language edition contains texts originally published in French, revised, much extended and combined, for the first time in this form.

67 Ibidem, pp. 7–8.

read by the reader (being the subsequent researcher in this concept) are each time a different story/narrative.⁶⁸

These declarations are attested to by the empirical parts of Pollak's study, where the biographical interview recorded by the author is analysed. The analysis begins with the author evoking his first contact with his interlocutor and the process of building mutual trust. It is emphasised that the precondition for the success of this biographical interview was that it was not only he who selected the individual to be researched, as he was selected by her too, when she decided to entrust her story to him.⁶⁹ This apparently obvious statement is certainly worth noting as it strongly underlines the subject status of both partners to the interview situation: stronger even than vague declarations and exhortations to respect subjectivity, as often seen in qualitative research.

Michael Pollak's analysis of the single biographical account is a sociological analysis. What he looks for primarily in his interviewee's narrative is the supra-individual, the socially constituted – on the level of narrative, memory, identity, as well as the individual's biographical experiences: the ones she evokes and the ones she neglects. Moments of silence are not simplistically interpreted as forgetfulness: they signify an inability to utter things unutterable rather than oblivion. The author attempts to recognise the border between the expressible and the inexpressible.⁷⁰

The second part of Pollak's book (each part could be treated as a separate study) compares the various forms of autobiographical statements made by former KZ inmates. Subject to careful analysis here are: court testimonies the former inmates made as witnesses; statements made for historical committees; sociographic research; oral biographical stories collected as part of oral history projects; and written and published autobiographies. The last two varieties of narrative are covered at length, as they are approached as the best and the richest sources for social studies. They best express the memory and identity of the narrators, their autonomy, and their group/social affiliation. And, especially if they are unstructured biographical accounts, they serve as the best guides to the camp experience, offering insight into the processes of adapting to life in a totalitarian institution and also beyond, with the burden of its memory.

Pollak's analysis extends to a variety of narrative forms, various ways of constructing the story. However, these 'narratological' analyses enable him to tell us something important not only about the narratives as such, but also about the social worlds, or universes, their authors are set within. Pollak shows how autobiographical research can wisely combine interpretive inspiration with normative or realistic inspiration (the German and the French school, following Bertaux).⁷¹

68 N.K. Denzin, *Interpretive Biography*, p. 77.

69 M. Pollak, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

70 *Ibidem*, pp. 89 ff.

71 This is not just a figurative statement. Michael Pollak was born in 1948 in Vienna. He studied sociology in Linz and then, at the encouragement of Pierre Bourdieu,

Although intentional, the combination avoids abusing such labels, or becoming attached to them. As he wrote, the structures and styles of autobiographical narratives refer one not just to the story-telling person but to the group(s) he or she belongs to. The typical is researchable and identifiable through the individual. Typical female narratives are discernible from typically male ones, stories told by members of the lower social classes are generally different from those given by members of the upper class. One can search for what is typical about the accounts of members of a single social group – political, religious, or cultural. Such typical, social elements are immanent and recognisable in any story, although stories are not reducible to this dimension only. Conversely, an individual narrative can be recognised as recounting the fate of a group for which it appears typical, if not representative (although not in a statistical sense).⁷²

Let these considerations of Michael Pollak act as forerunners to my own typologies.

with whom he corresponded and later collaborated, moved to Paris in 1975 to work at the *École pratique des hautes études* and subsequently at the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS). He maintained intensive scholarly contacts with Austria, particularly with sociologists and social historians at the *Ludwig-Boltzmann-Institut für Historische Sozialwissenschaft*. He acted as an important (two-way) intermediary between Austrian and French researchers. He spent the final years of his scholarly activity researching into the social effects of AIDS, the disease that caused his premature death in 1992.

72 Cf. M. Pollak, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

**Part II: The accounts of former camp
inmates: recognising the meanings**

3 The camp inmate experience seen through autobiographical narratives: a tentative ‘typology’

The Mauthausen concentration camp system held some 200,000 inmates in total, including almost 50,000 Poles. Less than half of them did not survive to see the liberation. Ten years ago, some five hundred Mauthausen survivors were still living in Poland. As part of the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project, we have recorded the biographical narrations of 164 of these individuals. I mention these figures in order to remark once again how casual and non-representative my research material would have been were I attempting to make any resolute statements on the Nazi concentration camp experience. Those still alive are those who would have been the youngest, the most robust and the strongest of the *kacet* inmates. But, even just moments after the liberation, the freed prisoners’ stories would not have been fully representative, either: they would only have covered certain pieces of the camp experience. Or perhaps, they would not have represented those of most importance for the camp as a totalitarian institution – those at its very bottom. It must be borne in mind that the regular inmates, who were the definite majority within the camp, were only a minority among those who survived. Although some of the former may have survived, it was not they who wrote a history of the camps. Primo Levi acutely perceived this ‘error in the sample’, when he realised that, with the distance of the years (as he stated in the mid-1980s, forty years after leaving the camp), it was apparent that the camp-related stories had been produced almost exclusively by former inmates like himself. In other words, those who had never reached the bottom. Those who either did not return, or whose ability to observe and describe has been paralysed by the suffering they had been through.⁷³ Levi is concerned by their silence. He resumes this thread, listening attentively to his mute campmates:

The ‘saved’ of the *Lager* were not the best, those *predestined to do good*; the bearers of a message. What I had seen and lived through proved the exact contrary. ... I felt innocent, yes, but enrolled among the saved and therefore in permanent search of a justification in my own eyes and those of others. ... I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion of which I have become conscious little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years. We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we

73 P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, New York, 1989, p. 17 (a Polish translation of this seminal book has also been issued: P. Levi, *Pogrążeni i ocaleni*, transl. by S. Kasprzyskiak, Kraków, 2007).

are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so ... have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the 'Muselmanns', the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance.⁷⁴

I am not in a position to develop a 'typology' of camp fates, experiences, attitudes, and/or behaviours. The design I will follow is more modest than that: I listen, read, view the autobiographical narratives of the once-prisoners. And it is in those voices, texts, and images, only there, that I can find the differences and the similarities. The process takes place at the level of narration and text, the stories listened to and heard are entangled in my Interviewees' specific experiences, and social universes. In other words, they form an integral part of such experiences and universes. Hence, my recognitions and 'typologies' do not concern *Lager*-related experiences in general but those that have been recounted to me in the 'here and now': filtered over and over, and much digested – in a variety of ways, including supra-individual.

While meeting our Interviewees and taping their stories, which run for several hours, we can primarily, if not exclusively, see the individuals in them. Their narratives seem unique, individual, their own. If not in their entirety, then at least their most expressive fragments – those describing the special situations, places, and persons. Tape-recorded and transcribed, reviewed, listened to and read once again, they become separated from their authors, our Interviewees. The latter remain the subjects of the initial meeting, sometimes becoming important persons for us, while their narratives become like the other stories, as we can see them more and more clearly. This is true not only for their narrative autobiographical form but also in the contents of the reappearing or similar images (and imaging). The camp was a totalitarian and totalising institution, reducing humans to a prison number, levelling them down, annihilating them. This is why the stories told by those who have survived so resemble one another:

The concentration camp inmates constituted a collectivity that was isolated, subject to the operation of one and the same violence, vegetating in similar conditions and under incessant threat, awaiting the shared lot of a rapid and heavy death at the ultimate end, while desiring to resume their so varied biographies, cut halfway through by the camp. This is perhaps where the uniformity of the inmate community is exhausted; beyond this limit, differences appear.⁷⁵

Yet, the similarities in the narratives of the survivors do not only stem from the similarities of their experiences within the extremely oppressive and standardising totalitarian institution. The narratives appear homogenised also because they have developed within the same culture of memory and commemoration/

74 Ibidem, p. 82.

75 A. Pawełczyńska, op. cit., p. 63.

remembrance: their authors belong to the milieu of Polish former political prisoners of Nazi concentration camps and their stories often have a generalised historical narrative, with *Lagers/kacets* as the background, referencing one another and following each other's pattern. Each autobiographical narrative evokes not only its author's individual experiences but also the stories and incidents of the others, important occurrences (for a particular group of inmates) from the history of the camp, or from the history at all. It is only by recognising these historical contexts and paving a way through their entanglement that one can get closer to the individual experiences. Individual, experienced by the Interviewees, is not to say the 'raw' experiences: they are never raw, once they have been communicated, expressed in language. What is 'raw' remains unspoken.

What is it, then, that the many autobiographical stories of the Mauthausen survivors (and, of survivors from other camps) have in common, when they are collected using the narrative interview method? Let me try to identify a few crucial similarities.

- (1) First, a majority of the interviewees focus on their camp experience while constructing their autobiographical story. It is this experience – or rather, a collection of diverse ordeals that make up a single common *Lager* experience, which also includes the journey made to the camp and the epos of the way back home⁷⁶ – that forms the narrative's central theme. The time at the camp usually represents the most important biographical stage, the biography's turning point, an experience that is incomparable with any other from the time before or after that at the camp. Using the language of biographical sociology, I would call it a trajectorial experience, an epiphany. But it is not the specific, ontological status of this fragment of one's life that makes it the main topic of most of the stories told by my Interviewees. I have visited them, and have taped their autobiographical narrations simply because they were once prisoners of a *kacet*. And although I have many a time emphasised that I would be interested in the entire history of their lives, many of these Interviewees have tended to define our meeting as an opportunity to give a testimony of their stay at Mauthausen and, sometimes, also of their other wartime experiences. They are usually convinced that no other piece of their experience is important, worth recounting, or interesting to me as the listener, save for those unique and historical ordeals. Convincing them that I have also come over to listen to the story of their 'ordinary things', from before and after the war – *as well as* those of the wartime/camp-time – does not suffice. More questions often appear necessary to ask as the meeting goes on, if I am to be told at all about such things. But even the questions sometimes did not help. Things that are

76 I have borrowed the phrase 'epos of the way back home' from M. Pollak, who entitled this fragment of his analysis of a biographical interview with an Auschwitz survivor 'Epos der Heimkehr', in *op. cit.*, pp. 59–65.

regular, normal, repeatable, daily routines do not constitute easy material that can be processed in narrative terms. How can one tell a story about ‘nothing happening’, being simply ‘busy working’, ‘living in/at ...’, ‘retiring’. The latter experience is probably the most prone to fading away in my Interviewees’ stories. The end of one’s professional life, adulthood and the self-reliance of not only the narrator’s children but his or her grandchildren, their lack of power or of the potential to meet new challenges in the life – in a word, withdrawal from many a social activity – reinforces the feeling that they live in a biographical ‘occurrenceless’ time. Nothing important happens in their lives anymore; and, there is nothing else that can possibly happen. For many of my Interviewees, this period of retirement, which they perceive as ‘empty’ in narrative terms, covers the recent dozen or so, or even twenty or thirty years. Quite a few entered this stage at more or less the time I came into the world.

There are significant exceptions, of course. There are those who fill their narratives with stories about the last days of their lives, about travelling, trips, visits to spas, mountain trekking, children and grandchildren, work and relaxing on the garden plot. More often, they talk about their involvement with the worlds of the former inmates, participations in anniversary commemorative celebrations, commemoration rituals, trips to sites of memory, or – quite a recent frequent phenomenon – trips to Germany or Austria to join meetings with local and public youth communities, where they recount their camp-time experiences.

- (2) The *Lager* experience is evoked in these stories as a collective experience. A personal account becomes an exemplification of the fate of a group or collectivity.⁷⁷ This is clearly observable on the level of linguistic structures: the personal pronoun ‘I’/‘me’ is superseded by ‘we’/‘us’, the active voice by the passive. The narrative of the arrest, transport to the camp, crossing the gate, and the first weeks, sometimes months (or, the whole period) inside tends not to be constructed with phrases such as ‘I did ...’, as is otherwise typical of autobiographical accounts, but rather, ‘... was done to us’. The activity of the acting subject tends to fade away, to be replaced by experiencing and sustaining, suffering, enduring. Thus, actions are done to the subject – but the subject is collective: not, however, a group, but a uniform mass of identical *Häftlings* (Polonised as ‘*heftlings*’). This manner of narrating is characteristic to collective trajectorial experiences. Imprisonment at a Nazi concentration camp is certainly an instance of such experience. Yet, this recognition needs to be complemented. With time, as the prisoner was accruing camp ‘seniority’ and the inmate was becoming an ‘old number’, the form of the narrating is reshaped. The autobiography regains its traditional structure: the subject/narrator appears with increasing frequency as the originator or causer of the events occurring. On a grammatical level, we reencounter the first person

77 A. Rokuszevska-Pawelek, op. cit., p. 183.

singular and the active voice. The various individual stories offer different methods of recovering this once-annihilated subjectivity. The ways in which the trajectory is overpowered, worked on, are varied too. We can, nonetheless, risk the generalisation that the greater an inmate's seniority, the more that traces of such an overpowering effort can be found in the narrative fragments of the story: more of 'I/'me' than of 'we/'us'. With respect to the personal pronoun, first person singular, the focus shifts from the passive to the active: 'I did' something, instead of something was done to me ('I was beaten/driven/robbed/...'). The narrator's gradually regained subjectivity is indicative of the degree of their domestication within the universe they are describing, mastering its rules, becoming attuned to life as a prisoner/inmate, and overcoming its trajectorial potential.

- (3) The individual experiences of the Interviewees are often evoked in strict association with a generalised historical narrative of the concentration camp of Mauthausen. The history of the camp, the way it functioned, and its various institutions become the subject of the story on equal terms with the individual's own fate in the *kacet*. Now, they have gained primacy over this fate. Hence, this comes as yet another aspect of the narrator's (self-)objectification. Instead of hearing a story about what incidentally occurred or happened to/with 'me' ('us'), what 'I/'we' experienced or have been through, we hear a story of what it was like in the camp, what (and when) happened/occurred therein, and what it all looked like in there. This 'all' refers to describing the material, the static aspect of the camp (the topography of the *Lager* and of the workplace, the appearance of the barracks and plank beds, the prison uniform, etc.). Also, the elements of the camp routine (wake-up calls, assembly, the way to work and the labour performed, the return, evening assembly, the quarantine procedure, the *rewir*, i.e. sickroom, etc.). The motifs that constantly arise in descriptions of the living conditions in the *Lager* include hunger, cold, dirt, sicknesses, exhaustion from labour, violence, abuse and maltreatment.⁷⁸ Generalised statements concerning prisoners of other nationalities appear often: such inmates are taken and pictured en masse, juxtaposed with 'our' people and set against the Poles. In these comparisons, the Poles are treated, for a change, as a uniform group, a whole. The story frequently mentions the names of the best-known tormenters in the Mauthausen *Lager*, particularly Commandant Franz Ziereis (also featured is the history of his capture, interrogation and death right after liberation). An almost fixed element in this story is the impending threat that the inmates would be put into the *adits* (mining tunnels) and blown up on the eve of liberation.

With these elements predominant, what we are given is a history of the camp, rather than a history of one's life. Sometimes, the events (and camp legends) evoked are in no way linked with the Interviewee's individual fate,

78 Ibidem, p. 184.

although there is an intermediate link: the very fact that one has been imprisoned at Mauthausen or Gusen (incarceration in these largest camps of that particular *Lager* system best contributes to such a historicisation) legitimises the upholding of such narratives, which belong to the camp's collective memory. Not only does it legitimise, but it also imposes the obligation of doing service to such memory. In the least advantageous variant of doing such service, the survivor's narrative cannot free itself from the shadow of occasional speeches or talks to young people, in which the narrator has grown proficient, with the cost of overriding his or her own personal experience.

In the context of a specific interview, both narratives always appear interpenetrated – so strongly sometimes that it is extremely difficult to distinguish them, especially since the Interviewee often does not help to this end. What they do is recount – they tell a story about themselves or, on other occasions, about the camp. At one moment a guide to their own biography, they become a moment later, perhaps in the very next sentence, a guide to the camp – including to nooks and recesses that they never peeped into. One needs to listen attentively and then read the transcribed interviews carefully in order to recognise the boundary between autobiographical memory, the memory of one's own experiences, and the narrator's knowledge of what it was like, and what was happening, 'overall'. This recognition can rarely be precise, however. The boundary is completely blurred in many places, with only traces of it visible elsewhere. Knowledge usually follows experience, but the two are strictly unified. The knowledge functions so that one can understand, interpret, and add meaning/sense to the experience. It allows the narrator to set their own fate within that of the collective; thus, to position oneself as part of a collectivity. It just so happens that this meaning/effort at sense-development shapes the narrator's memory to a larger extent than his or her real camp experience.⁷⁹

It is quite apparent that various interviewees have a different knowledge of concentration camps and their history. Some are researchers in this field, and

79 Many examples can be found in a number of accounts to support this observation. There is one particularly characteristic episode that has stuck in my mind – a scene of arrival at the Mauthausen camp, as evoked in a biographical interview by one of the former inmates (account taped as part of the project called 'Biography and National Identity', carried out in the mid-1990s by the University of Łódź): "I can remember us entering through the Mauthausen gate and me seeing that grand ... gate, a wrought gate, you know, a concrete, iron one, with the inscription 'Arbeit Macht Frei', ... then I knew that it was almost the way [...] as Dante describes it, we are entering a hell from which there is no way out." (Quoted after: A. Rokuszewska-Pawełek, op. cit., p. 187). The fact is, the inscription 'Arbeit Macht Frei' was never featured at the Mauthausen camp gate, and so was it with a few other Nazi camps, e.g. Ravensbrück, Buchenwald (the latter had an inscription reading 'Jedem das Seine'). Incidentally, some of my Interviewees emphasise that there was *no* such ill-famed and cruelly cynical welcoming motto, which has been referred to so many a time.

have written books, articles or studies on the topic. Their oral stories are usually most intensely permeated with the history of the camps, the related facts and statistics. The narrators of this category are the ones most easily able to abandon autobiographical specifics. A similar phenomenon is seen with those survivors who, many times and on various occasions, have already told their camp stories, of themselves and of the others. Some of the former prisoners are almost professional narrators, or storytellers, while others are simply camp guides. Their oral stories, told over and over again, as a routine, tend to be more a reproduction of their previous narratives rather than an attempt to approach distant experiences. This process is understandable: this is how human memory works. But this is not to say, nor does it not have to mean, that a survivor telling his or her story for the twentieth, fiftieth or hundredth time is emotionally distanced from it. Such 'professionalism', often justified in terms of a 'mission with respect to the generations to come', is sometimes one of the ways in which the camp trauma can be tackled. Experienced narrators among the former KZ inmates are probably most represented among the former inmates of the camps located within Poland – particularly Auschwitz-Birkenau, being the largest and bearing the heaviest symbolic burden of all. Smaller camps, more distant from Polish territory, such as Mauthausen, Buchenwald and Flossenbürg, have not generated similarly audible survivor stories, to which subsequent generations can refer.

In turn, those former inmates who have written their camp memoirs (although not necessarily had them published) often tend to reproduce that earlier, already-written account in the course of the autobiographical interview. The images that have been fixed in writing congeal so strongly in their narrative form that they are sometimes evoked afterwards in an almost identical manner, using the same words, or even whole phrases. When listening to such stories, we get the impression that they are being read from a sheet – even though they are not. Even so, there have been sporadic occasions where an interviewee insisted that he or she must read a fragment of their recollections during the interview. On other occasions, the text that has been written earlier discourages the telling of an oral story, as "I have already described everything there".

The preceding narratives thus inevitably intercede between the camp experience of the past and the present concrete story that I listen to during our meeting, this particular interaction, our interview which I preserve by taping and archiving.

- (4) Almost each of the autobiographical accounts of former camp prisoners that we have heard, or at least each 'successful' account, contains strictly narrative fragments that form a story about their individual unique experience. This individuality and uniqueness concerns the narrator's perspective, and is not at odds with what I indicated a moment ago. Narrative fragments are set within the frame of the totalising and standardising institution of the Nazi concentration camp. However, the speaker's effort does not focus on telling a story about the camp, the way it functioned, and the sufferings that took place in it. These fragments are

not at all subject to such rationalising and ordering procedures. The fragments are not so much elicited from the Interviewee's memory but, rather, they are extracted from it, by the interviewee, all of a sudden and unexpectedly. These occurrences or events include those which have become the most memorable, most powerfully stirring, and which trigger the strongest emotions today. On listening to these stories, recounted as individual camp adventures, we clearly hear the Interviewee speaking faster (possibly, in response to the recollections awoken or aroused). The distance between their telling of their story in the here and now and their experience of the there-and-then is shortened – a distance that offers a sense of security and, thereby, control. Such approaches, or close-ups, are the most important and most valuable for me – and perhaps also for many others who have listened to survivor stories. They are all the more valuable if such images can astonish the Interviewee themselves, if they are verbalising them for the first time. This happened repeatedly during our meetings, and such instances were recorded for the first time ever, in almost all such cases.

It is symptomatic that the contents of these fragments, the specifics they describe, are loosely associated with the generalising descriptions of the camp, the conditions and interpersonal relations prevalent in it. They are not simple examples or pieces of evidence that attest to how terrible a place the camp was; such fragments usually do not directly refer to the violence suffered. Instead, the sufferings incurred by other inmates come to the fore, rather than sufferings borne by the narrator. Far more frequently, such moments are in contrast to the camp routine; they are signs of a universe that exists outside the camp. And it is from this contrast, or clash, that they draw their symbolic power and expressiveness in the narrator's memory.

Here are two very similar examples of such a clash. Their similarity offers food for thought, especially given that each of these close-ups is quoted from the accounts of different former inmates, from different camps:

There were very weird things happening sometimes because, as the bombing was going on – the Americans were bombing very often – there was the chemical factory Steyer, then, somewhere halfway between Linz and Gusen, by the Danube, there was such a grand chemical establishment and the bombs frequently fell there, and well, the lights were going out in our place. And the light went out then, it was at night, and just as the light goes out, then, well, you'd bunk down in that work, and sleep. But then, a strange thing happened. Some marvellous, trained, great artist, a singer, an Italian, began singing. It became dark some time after, it's absolute darkness in that *adit*, this is as it ought to be, well, and this, silently, and all at once he starts singing some high-flying operatic arias; well, such a concert... That is strange... It was some singer such a high class that when these recollections come back, then you can never hear such a concert [i.e. comparable to that particular one]...⁸⁰

80 From the account of Janusz Bąkowski, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_154.

This fragment comes from a video-recorded interview. A transcript is not capable of rendering what was probably the most important part of the communication at that moment. The silence marked by the ellipses signifies a great agitation, which brought a lump to the narrator's throat. This silence embraces the delight with the camp song performed at that moment by a prisoner in the blacked-out Messerschmitt factory in Gusen.

Here is the second fragment:

[I saw] the camp orchestra, which played marches. They played behind the barbed wire, between the first crematorium of Auschwitz – not in Birkenau – and the villa of Commandant Höss. They played for the Germans, for the officers and their families, at a time when hundreds or thousands of people were simultaneously being gassed and burned at Birkenau on literally a daily basis. Those people had no problem – I think about those listeners – the Germans – listening to Beethoven, Mozart, or Brahms. I once listened myself, because I played the violin as a kid, so music always attracted me. But I had a shock. One day, as I was on my way to the kitchen, to carry sand and gravel and cobble, all of a sudden, out of the block right in front of the gate – the orchestra had their lodgings at the right-hand side, and there was a bawdy house on the upper storey – a prisoner appeared in the window, and sang an aria from *Tosca*, the moment Cavaradossi sings before he dies. That was such a shocking sensation... Obviously, the SS-men quickly pulled him down from that window. I don't know what happened to him. As I learned, he was a tenor from the Brussels opera, a Jew... In any case, when I hear this aria today, I see all that.⁸¹

This recollection is rather like the one quoted previously, although it is introduced differently: a reference is made to the camp orchestra. We find it embedded within a more extensive commentary, describing the narrator's emotion more precisely. However, the crucial aspect is almost identical to that in the previous image: the contrast in juxtaposition with the camp universe and the strong agitation it triggers in the interviewee. This account has also been videotaped. It is worth watching to see, at the point of the ellipses, that the impetuous sensation arose not only there, in the camp, but it reappears today, as the aria is sung within the space of memory.

- (5) An inherent element of the autobiographical accounts of former *Lager* prisoners is the various attempts at understanding, interpreting, and adding sense and meaning to one's own camp experiences – that of survival, first and foremost. This involves wrestling with questions that are sometimes not expressly

81 From the account of Tadeusz Smreczyński, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_130 (recorded by Dorota Pazio). (For the quotes from accounts based on interviews done by my KARTA colleagues, I give the interviewer's name; for the interviews I have myself taped, only reference numbers are given.)

formulated, but remain implicit in most cases: ‘Why *me?*’, ‘Why was *I* brought to the camp?’, ‘Why have I survived, while so many around me were killed?’ The latter question is posed most acutely and dramatically by Jews saved from the Holocaust, who struggle with the fact that they survived. But this question also torments so many of the non-Jewish former inmates of the Nazi concentration camps too.⁸² For them – at least, for some of them – it is perhaps somewhat easier to find the answers, and attempt to offer rationalisations. As a rule, however, these are extemporary, incomplete, and unable to offer lasting relief or consolation. Instead, these are partial explanations, often compiled in an ad-hoc manner, as the narration proceeds – and applicable to concrete situations that one has managed to undergo and survive by means of a miracle or accident, or divine providence. Or, all at the same time.

These diverse strategies for tackling the experience of imprisonment and survival in the camp, and the trauma of these experiences, are dependent upon a number of factors: the reasons for the arrest; one’s position in the camp structure; shared outlooks and ideologies; professed values – before and after the time in the camp; belief or otherwise (lack of faith) in God;⁸³ the extent or degree to which the individual was able to resume their pre-camp world; and whether there was anyone – and exactly who – was waiting outside to meet the survivor.

82 This wrestling with a sense of guilt and shame, among the non-Jewish prisoners of KZs too, was also recognised and analysed by P. Levi in his aforementioned *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 70ff.

83 Survival is rationalised through faith particularly strongly among those survivors who experienced conversion while at the camp: “The Jehovah’s Witnesses, to whom I felt attracted in the camp, initially didn’t want to accept me. I didn’t know why. Maybe they were frightened away by the red triangle I had, for I was a political one [= prisoner]. How much I wept there, only Jehovah, God, knows. There was nothing drawing me to the world any more, I saw the abhorrence, I saw the violence, and now, they’re not willing to accept me! So I incessantly besieged those brethren, that I’m desirous, I called for help. In consequence of that, I was accepted one day into the brethren’s community. There’s no ‘madam’ or ‘sir’ among us; Jesus said, ‘You are all brothers and sisters’. As I learned later on, a brother, supervisor of this group of inmates in the camp, his name was, as I can remember, Martin Pötzing, the anointed. He said one evening at an assembly of ours, as we were assembling every day, ‘cause, where’d we go? In small groups. ‘Brothers, that must be a Lord’s ewe, as it is constantly attacking us’. As a result of that, he ordered that, sort of, oral educational, biblical studies be conducted with me. After six such studies, I declared I was ready to receive baptism. A baptism is only worthy in God’s eyes if through complete submergence. What it expresses is that the individual has resolved to deliver God’s will. ... Our brethren the carpenters made a long trough, a rather tall one. Well, a larger bathtub, as if it was. And they brought that trough, in broad daylight, to the ironworks. The SS men thought it was needed for parts, as we were dismantling the machines, appliances. So, when they went away, we [transferred] the trough, via the central-heating duct, to the boiler room. The stoker at the boiler room was

Only some of our interviewees were able to construct more durable, more complete ‘theories of survival’ which could place their own camp experience at a safe distance and give them enough strength to be able to decide for themselves whether, when, how, and for how long to evoke it. Here is one of those rare stories on the usefulness of the *Lager* experience and the lifelong lesson learned from it:

I do not surrender easily, thanks to the camp. Once I had endured the camp, why should I not be able to endure other things? It certainly strengthened you, gave you respect for other humans, human dignity. You understood what being human is, to look not at a man’s external features but instead to spot the values he has inside him. It very often varies. We were all dressed the same there. The value of some of the people, their fortitude, showed, the inner being. So, you’ve learned all that in the camp, never to surrender; perseverance. This was a very good lesson, looking at my life as a missionary; only that it was too costly, when you think about the victims. Had we all passed through that camp... That was another novitiate, which no-one can repeat. That is impossible. A very costly lesson, unfortunately. Fourteen were killed out of twenty-six, and that was already in the first year. Fourteen young people: twenty-one, twenty-two years of age. I think about them very often. I should like, all of them ought to be at the altar [i.e. declared blessed/saints]. You can feel you carried on their legacy, for yourself and for them. This toughened you, gave you strength, no two ways about it. It’s just that they were young people. There was nobody to cry as they were dying.⁸⁴

In parallel, there are many who are unable to find a similar philosophical consolation or so deftly to project their post-*Lager* experiences onto an interpretation of the *Lager*-time ones. Instead, they struggle with their uncontrollable camp trauma for the whole of their lives. Usually, they do this alone, or share the struggle with their camp mates – with no professional psychological support. This aspect in particular constitutes a quite marked difference between Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, and other Eastern European camp survivors with many of their camp colleagues from Israel, the United States, or Western European countries.

a brother of ours. He bolted the door of the boiler room from the outside, and we [went down] one day via that duct to the boiler room, and there, in the boiler room, brother Martin Pötzinger delivered a speech, obviously in the German language, but it was translated straight into Polish. And there I assumed baptism, through complete submergence. Thus, I became, from that moment on, an ordained servant of God. And so, I was the fifty-sixth Jehovah’s Witness in the camp, but the first witness created behind the wires”. From the account of Zygmunt Sawicki, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_071 (recorded by Michał Zarzycki).

84 From the account of Fr. Marian Żelazek, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_072 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner).

That this struggle is only partly effective is perhaps most frequently manifested in the thread of the nightmare, recurring in many a story, with the plot taking place at the camp, or inspired by that experience.⁸⁵ Here are two examples of such nocturnal torment:

I want to let you know that I had, such a, dream; // I would somehow like to mention that dream. // I'm talking about those nightmarish dreams. I dreamed, sir, that I was in the camp. There's a car standing at the camp exit gate. I don't know if that is [= was] Melk; something like that, in any case. The tarpaulin, and there's bread. I went in under the tarpaulin, to the bread, and the car pulls out at some point and crosses the gate, meaning that I'm leaving the area of the camp and, sir, my fear – not that – my fear that I found myself outside the camp area, and once I am caught, they'd kill me. You know, and the worst is that in the camp I still could survive, whereas there, if they catch me, I'll be killed. So, sir, waking up from such a dream – you felt almost happy.⁸⁶

Here is one more close-up, where the boundary between dream and rational second thoughts towards the past experience is completely blurred:

... Whether he [= referring to himself] had no fear or something, since he was younger. Now, some sort of stress, you're feeling some dread, sort of. You don't believe this can be so, or how? Why was it like this? Initially, not so, somehow; now, there's more. Some thrill, fear, you couldn't tell what it is. Oh my God, what's up, there! Jesus Christ! First, as he was younger, then, maybe, the work, he didn't have things, it was different then, he was busy doing something else, whilst now... At home, as he sits so, go somewhere, then [it] is there, you're recalling [yourself] everything. Sometimes, I scream in my asleep. The worst thing is when you're seeing the murdering, the shooting, lashing, the abuse in plain view. A Kraut is laughing to himself, with gloves on, and meting out the abuse. Beating, murdering, kicking. I can remember, the Jews, they had a separate field. When they were carrying their transports, then, he [= one of them] would [at times] go through the gantry to the field. The bastard Fritz's walking, smoking his cigarette, there's a child crying, [grabs the child] by the hand, for there were the wires, not very tall, two meters [high], and throws it behind that wire. He walked on. Same things were going on and on there.⁸⁷

85 For more on this aspect, see the investigations made by the Krakow psychiatrists' team representing the A. Kępiński 'school', published in the special fascicles of *Przegląd Lekarski* from 1962 to 1991.

86 From the account of Jan-Ryszard Sempka, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_036.

87 From the account of Włodzimierz Kaliński, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_108 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner).

Not only does the camp torment and oppress at night, but it influences the survivor's social life, his or her ability to build and maintain interpersonal relationships. Many former inmates are aware of this burden that they carry. Some have managed to overcome it:

The camp has burdened me with a stigma of this kind, in interpersonal relations. I would judge people – always considering, on meeting someone new, being with him for a while, talking to him for a while, whether it's a colleague, or whatever, then I always thought, once I've worked them out a little: how would he have behaved in the camp? What would he do? How would he behave, in such a situation? And that very often dissuaded me from [getting to know] that man. ... Man is tested in such conditions, in the conditions we were in, be it in the camp, or in the prison, then man is tested to reveal what is really inside him, what prevails in him. ... For I was a little savage after the camp. I didn't like company, didn't like going anywhere at all, or rather going somewhere, like, in the open air, to see how the water was running. I simply wanted to quieten down.⁸⁸

Sometimes, the camp experience can have no theoretical explanation, or rationalisation whatsoever. It may not vex during the night or have a strong impact on the present-day interpersonal relations that are built and maintained by the once-inmate. Yet, it leaves different, less-visible and more-modest traces – which is not to say that they are less important to the survivor:

[My stay in the camp] has shaped my outlook on life. // Well, I, you know, am perhaps more sensitive [now] to the issues of poverty. The birds migrate here, hundreds of birds in the winter, and I give them daily half a kilogramme to one kilogramme of porridge. I give them this for the whole of the winter. And my neighbours are astonished, and I get hundreds of these [birds] coming over here, flying in here, various fowl. But they are hungry, I have to give them something, for I believe they need to be fed, well, it can't be helped. There are cats, you know, who come in; I also feed the cats. They come for the feed I put out, which the cats get, in the garden; hedgehogs come, from the Citadel, hedgehogs come here. Well then, these hedgehogs are also fed here. I don't chase them away, but give them milk instead, pour it in. Hedgehogs like milk very much, as it appears, they like milk, eat soup. ... I've got hazelnut trees and the nuts, the trees. Now in the autumn, squirrels come from the Citadel. And these squirrel have grown so bold that they freely wander around the garden here. When a cat comes, it flees into the tree, the cat cannot catch the squirrel, as the squirrel is more nimble. When there are no cats, then the squirrels walk in here, across this garden. I don't prevent them, they're taking these nuts, then let them eat, they are hungry. In the winter, still, you know, once I've thrown into each of these hollows

88 From the account of Edward Pyś, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_092 (recorded by Michał Zarzycki).

in the large trees at the Citadel, I drop off the nuts so they can have a nibble there as well. Well, it is a creature, it needs to survive the winter. And the people are probably astonished, the neighbours, think that I am insane. But these are hungry creatures.⁸⁹

For many prisoners I have talked to, Mauthausen was the last stage in their *Lager* journey; it was there, or at one of the subcamps, that they saw the liberation. Many had been imprisoned earlier at Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Stutthof, Neuengamme or, an even more frequently, Auschwitz-Birkenau. A large group of prisoners had been brought to Mauthausen from this last camp in late 1944, as a result of Auschwitz-Birkenau's (so-called) evacuation in the face of the approaching front. Mauthausen and, in particular, some of its subcamps, were located deep inside the Reich, far from the frontline. Armament factories operated at these sites, hidden in rock tunnels, drifts or galleries, until the end of April 1945.

I mention this in order to introduce two substantial biographical events experienced by my Interviewees: one is related to the transfer from one camp to another; the other, with the stay at Auschwitz-Birkenau and witnessing the annihilation of the Jews. The former experience is covered at length within the detailed analysis provided later, so as to show its different variants. At this point, I would like to pause for a while to consider the latter. Let me leave aside, however, the theoretical fragments of the accounts, the comparisons between the Polish and the Jewish camp prisoner's fate. Although present in many accounts in the form of generalisations, or, sometimes, an 'auctioning' of sufferings, they remain beyond the scope of my present interest. What I am after is concrete narrative things, hard facts, which bring the individual camp experience nearer. The Holocaust remained beyond the scope of the direct experience of my Interviewees, Polish political former prisoners of Nazi concentration camps. Yet, it took place in plain view of many of them. One did not have to go to Birkenau to witness the extermination of Polish Jewry: many a prisoner I talked to had been such an eyewitness before they were detained in the camp⁹⁰ – or, while they were in another camp, Mauthausen included. For, although the latter was not an extermination camp, Jewish inmates were treated with peculiar cruelty,

89 From the account of Eugeniusz Śliwiński, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_131.

90 Here is a recollection from the town of Biała-Podlaska under German Occupation, before the Interviewee was detained: "The wife went in the regular way. They were murdering the Jews in plain sight.... Two pits, like. There are traces still. Like this room, larger, that pit. And all those Jews went into those pits. The children, that's right, all went into there. I wasn't lying all the time like that, mister [the Interviewee had been wounded in the September 1939 campaign and immobilised for several months (PF's note)] – and then I scrambled out of the home, you know, with a rod, curious. Look awhile here, listen awhile there. You know that man is thoughtful, after all. You couldn't detach yourself completely, like that". From the account of

and this was strongly imprinted upon the memory of the Polish prisoners. Moments of discontinued narration, muteness, usually mean more in these fragments than the words spoken.

Block guard [*Blockführer*] Schteps's right-hand man in there was, it's hard to believe, a Jew fifty-plus years of age, looking like a one hundred per cent Jew, bold, with the nose like this. Ormicki, a professor from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. He was a geographer, I think. And that Schteps, he managed to hide him in a funk hole for a few weeks, because when there was the roll-call, he'd position himself in the second rank, mind you, so that the nose could not be seen sideways. Then, when he's counting, passing by, that one, then, just for him to manage to uphold. But, finally, some S[S]-man spotted him. He was dragged out, he [= the SS guard] called the *Lagerältester* [camp senior], that Helmut Becker man, about whom I had said, who had beaten me now and then. Together, there, with that block guard, for that block guard with a black *winkel* [i.e. triangular badge], Schteps, was a moderately tolerable man, because that *docent*, [associate professor] Ormicki spoke German, was a very sumptuous man, very... an intellectual, what can I say, a man of great class. And that, that little Schteps was not that stupid either, that narrow-minded, and this impressed him. As far as he could, he managed to hide him there. He wasn't even slim, looked good then, professor Ormicki. He was taken away. ... A large *Waschraum* [washroom] [was there] between the sickroom and the block at the back, where there were the showers. It was cold, very cold then. To the shower, which was frigid. Becker, plus one block guard, some, and a *Kapo*, some, there was no S[S]-man there, [took] him to the shower, and lashed [him] in the shower with sticks. So it went on, he tried to dodge, for the water was icy, then, well, they were driving in him with those sticks. And that lasted some two minutes, three minutes. I witnessed that. At some point, the sport was over, 'cause they put a hosepipe with water into his eyes. They set a strong current at him, and he burst... That's what it looked like.⁹¹

And, one more passage – even tougher, more painful for the narrating Interviewee:

The other day, at night, I mean, I [dreamt I] woke up in the morning and I was swollen, I put on my trousers, have to go to work in the morning, and we then worked in the *adit*, the one I commuted to by train. And, sir, I got dressed, the *Appelplatz* [roll-call ground], then the descent to the train, there was a ramp, specially built in front of the station, and the train drove up, they loaded us onto the train, we went to an identical ramp in the camp area, where the quarry was, everyone's exiting again, and now, sir, you need to go downstairs. I am becoming increasingly swollen with

Eugeniusz Sacewicz, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_073.

91 From the account of Stefan Pręgowski, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_003.

time. I cannot bend my legs anymore. My gross legs are literally stiff, my trousers are swollen now, and we were walking, sir, *einhacken zu fünf*, that is, as I said, in fives arm-in-arm, holding the one to your right with your right hand. These columns were slightly crooked, but you marched steadily. And beside me, to the right, // for I was the second in the row, of that five, // was a Hungarian Jew. As we had to go down those stairs, and the stairs were, sort of, broken, I couldn't keep up. And he was constantly shouting at us, to go faster, go faster, so that the column... // this is two thousand people, so that we can get off the ramp. Therefore, I cannot walk. So, the German who walked beside me, that SS-man, tells that Hungarian Jew to grab me by the hand. Not me to hold him, but for him to hold me. So the two of them led me on. And he, the Hungarian Jew, made, like, a gesture of impatience, // despondence, // something, sort of, as if he didn't want to do it. And, that moment, // that SS-man who guarded us, had a, sort of, Italian rifle, // they had, such, Italian rifles, those were rather short guns, with, such a, broken bayonet. And he struck him, with the butt of the rifle, on the back of his head. And the Jew fell, // fell, simply, on the ramp. And I was holding him, arm-in-arm, and so was quickly withdrawn, and those who were behind me had to take the Jew and carry him downstairs; they didn't so much carry him as drag him down to the roll-call area. It was not far away, as a result – the roll-call ground was not far from the ramp. And they laid him down, you know; we marched as the *Kommandos*, each of the *Kommandos* marched separately, and everyone was kept count of. And they laid him down beside our *Kommando*, as he [the Jew] was one of us; he was our co-operator. And the one I mentioned, a Gypsy, came over, gave him a few kicks, and he's shouting... // And then, he put a peg with [on] him, and crushed him.⁹²

The stay at Birkenau, close to the epicentre of the Holocaust and the machinery of mass extermination, has remained a peculiar, separate experience, gaining in extraordinariness also through the way it is read. On listening to the accounts of Polish Auschwitz-Birkenau prisoners, I cannot help thinking (though I could also presume certain completely other readings) that my Interviewees were 'scorched' there. Or, just scorched (no inverted commas), not only a figurative or symbolical meaning, like in the title of a book by Irit Amiel,⁹³ but also a thoroughly literal one. At times, just as literal:

Once I got inside Auschwitz, no Birkenau was there then, that's it. There were not many Jews, either. But in the year of '42, those transports started flowing in. ... They were gassed. Also me, there... // I was sent, a few times, with, such a, *Kommando*. Then, there was food in abundance. Because they had left it – and it was segregated,

92 From the account of Jan-Ryszard Sempka, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_036.

93 I. Amiel, *Scorched: A Collection of Short Stories on Survivors*, transl. by Vallentine Mitchell, London 2006.

unstitched. Unstitched, for those Jews had... jewellery // stitched up. I nourished myself a little. ... I even liked it there.⁹⁴

There are not many among our Interviewees who are capable even today of directly evoking that cold distance from 'there and then'. Or, perhaps, they would be able to if only they were courageous enough. Let us not mistake the simplicity and forthrightness of behaviouralistic imaging for the Interviewees themselves – the individual we can hear and see here and now. The strategies of tackling the experience of witnessing the Holocaust are diverse, and in most cases they are devised in ad-hoc fashion, on one's own.

I can remember, there was a transport that arrived from Kraków. We, mind you, just as observers or so-called senior inmates. For, once you've been through that hardship, you'd be classed among those seniors. And those seniors were engaged to do works – at the railway station, in to the *Kartoffelschale* ... – which is, potato unloading. And, I'm just going there, to the *Kartoffelschale*, I am on a wagon. With the potatoes; // but there's some train arriving, not like the one we have.

And this appears to be a train from Belgium, with Jews. And so, a Jewess, a nicely-dressed one, is looking through the window and eating chocolate. That's what, you know, for a prisoner like that, chocolate is milk-and-toast-and-honey, mister. And I say nothing to her, but I'm driving that shovel, without potatoes, and thinking to myself: maybe she'll give me a piece, or something. And she dropped one to the ground. Well, c'mon, I'm not going to climb down from the wagon, without the SS-man's order, to get on the ground, as he'll shot me dead. Yes, for he had a gun, // always, a gun in his hand ready to shoot, mister, yes indeed. But, I ask where she's from. And I knew that whoever arrives in Birkenau, then the thing's known. We already knew then where these transports were going, and we knew, // they were chased in front of our field. Who was interested in that then, and would write. But how would he write, mister? What on? On the ground. Then they wiped it later. Well, and then I ask her if she can understand German. '*O, ja, ich spreche Deutsch*', says she. // Yes, indeed. // And says she, "*Hier is das beste Kurort.*" And I burst out laughing. She came along to a health resort, to get cured. And I'm saying, '*Das is beste Schlachthaus.*' And she spit in my eyes. 'Cause there's a space between the wagons, but no spit fell on me, and she, 'Pish!' // I could've riffled ten shovelfuls... // In several languages, in French: '*Ensemble!*', in Polish: '*Zbiórka!*' For there were Frenchmen and Poles there. Well, and what's that like, we climbed down from the wagons and the train is at a stop, with those 'bathers'. I repeat what that Belgian woman said, a Jewess she was. But you couldn't tell it was a Jewess, mister. How can you judge it, sir? A Jew you can recognise, that's the circumcised thing. With a Jewess, no. And that's how many intelligent Jewesses saved their lives. Well, and, they checked

94 From the account of Czesław Oparcik, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_017 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb).

us, sir, yes, and there was a barn. A barn, sir, knocked together with, like, planks – patches, as we called them. That there's no way you could match them with the other [sic], understand?, yeah. The slots finger-wide, in some cases two fingers even. The SS-man says, 'Sit here. *Ruhe!*' And I, or someone else asked if you could glance, and he says, 'You can.' He opened the door ajar and sat himself at the door, and whoever wanted, could be looking over his head. I sat down, squatted down in a place such that I didn't, myself, need to... I could see all. So, the thing... // As we were scrambling out of the wagons and walking to the shed, there wasn't a single German on the platform. A company of Germans probably came in there all of a sudden, apparently, with sticks. And, together, they surrounded that whole platform in, like, a ring arrangement. And, off you get! And those are getting off. And, take everything, yes, with you. And the kids, and those suitcases, those, like, you know, mister. All that's arranged now. And what's next? There's some page walking, neatly dressed, and collecting letters from them. That they had arrived in a spa. For he even said how, what, to write, that German. *Was sollen Sie schreiben*. That they've arrived sound, they're healthy, are in good humour, and it's all going well with them. And they were writing this; that took a long time. We did not go to work anymore that day, we were just sitting in the booth. Every line [= family] obtained this, and there were words written down, and that page collected [the letters]. And he disappeared somewhere. He went off with all that. And then came those Germans with rods, and, the segregation happened at once. Yes. Males separately, and women with children, separately. Well, there, already, the things, and here, those sticks are now in operation, going. So far, it was all polite, mister, // yes, man, the German[s] gave a salute. And from that time on, as they started separating, then, all this, // the sticks swept across the heads, and the men went there to the left side, to the right side there went the women with the children. And, those traps and stuff. One, two, three, those men – right there. And, there's not a trace of them. They arranged them in fives, and, to the crematorium. To the gas, first.

And then continuing, with the women and children. And all they had, that good [= these goods], remained like that, like, in the open, yes. And then, they took the women, then, the women were placed, in that field. When we were back there, they were in the field with those children. At dusk, on that day. The cars came up, and, a struggle between the mothers and the SS-men, and they had their children snatched away from them. And just like they pick up cabbages in the field, so were those children thrown into the packing cases. He'd pluck, mister, and, into the cases. The normal way, thus, as if... // as I describe it, like you pick up cabbage. Into the case, and that went away. To be burnt as well. And they took the women in the night, so it was clean already for the morning. There wasn't a trace after, not of one. That's what it looked. That's the only time I watched it.⁹⁵

95 From the account of Eugeniusz Sacewicz, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_073.

This one single time was more than enough for the image of the annihilation being watched not only to strongly agitate and become deeply memorable, but also, to become one of my Interviewee's major biographical experiences, who had himself first-hand experience of dramatic ordeals: first, on the war front and subsequently, in a Gestapo gaol and several concentration camps – and, after the war, as a judge prosecuting Nazi criminals.

Some of the rescued prisoners, who had witnessed the annihilation of Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau, go beyond a dry description of what they saw. In their struggle to understand and adopt those images, a struggle that has been going on for several dozen years, they openly ask themselves difficult questions, theorising, trying to understand their own behaviour and their emotions in that particular situation. And, those of today – the ones they sense and recognise here and now, but in relation to, and because of, the emotions of the past:

That was in May, and it was then that the tragedy of Hungarian Jews started. Somewhere around the middle of May the first transportations arrived. The whole circus took place at the beginning. The crematoria were separated, fir branches were entwined among the barbed wire, so as to conceal it. Then, it all fell off, and everything could be seen. Besides, there was no possibility to protect yourself from that. The transportations were going, literally, day and night. Day and night they came along, between camp B1 and B2. And, after the selection, the people walked straight ahead, to 'Two' or 'Three', to those two crematoria, or, along that diagonal path, [t]here to the wood, to 'Four' and 'Five'. They walked in [t]here, and we walked in the opposite direction, to work, so we and the people walking to be put to death passed each other. It has to be said that it was, sort of, characteristic, to all the people at the camp, that they didn't want to, // could not, // weren't able to, I don't know, take care of others' affairs. Everyone thought about himself, or of their closest relatives. The death of humans was something, such a, workaday thing. The deaths of thousands of people, that was, in reality, hard to reckon up. Maybe it would've been simpler to bow before a dead individual, but, before the thousands? So, those people were walking to meet their death, and we were going the opposite direction, to work. They didn't know where they were going. They were told lies from beginning to end.

We knew what was going to happen to them a moment later, but, to be frank, we were completely uninterested. To this very day, there resides in me, not just in me, a sort of scourge that one can be that insensitive. For you could not help [those people] anyway. But to feel something, at all...

We were sitting some day on the plank bed, there were five of us on one such deck. There were blankets [provided] already, so-so ones, but there they were; straw mattresses too, with everything extracted, but there they were. And, well, there were things to eat, things to talk about. And when one of the mates asked, 'Listen, are we still normal people? If one of the civvies were driven in among us, // or one of them stood at the side, what would he say about us?' 'But what's happened?' And he says, 'Well, after all, as we're passing by, and the Jews are walking the opposite direction, to the crematorium, to the gas chamber, we are not interested. Can this

be happening under normal conditions, with a normal man?’ And then one of the colleagues responded, saying, ‘You know what? It seems to me personally that it’s not so bad about us yet. Because, at least me, when there are children going along, I *am* moved, in any case.’ Then we admitted he was right: indeed, the children passing along did affect us.

Whereas I should make the point that it seems to me today that the memory of this today is more emotion-laden for me than when seen at that time. Well, but this is what the camp was like; that was something completely different, that was another world.⁹⁶

In these various narratives on the experience of being a witness to the extermination of Jews, at such a close distance, we find one more reappearing, shared thread: asphyxiation from the smoke and fetor of burnt corpses. This is not confined to the image of wreaths of black smoke soaring over the camp area, but there is a repulsive odour encoded somewhere deep inside – on the biological, or physiological, level, hard for any rationalising effort to reach. This poison can be recognised and given with a name, but it cannot be removed from the organism:

Auschwitz was a camp of extermination. Enormous transports of Jews arrived there, in the first place. They were killed at the gas chambers, and burned. Not in crematoria at all, why the fuss, eh, with the crematoria. I saw those crematoria, six, eight corpses might’ve been burning there for forty minutes each, so how much could’ve been burnt [there]. And a transport arrived [with] several thousand Jews. So, they got it managed otherwise. They dug pits, threw those gassed corpses into those pits, poured mazut on all that, and set fire to it. And a column of black smoke went up from the pit. When the wind blew towards the camp, that was unbearable. For that was meat and bones being burned, and the mazut on top. Well, later on, I travelled to the United States on the ‘[Stefan] Batory’ [ocean liner] still. It was a mazut-propelled vessel, too, and at times the drift came out of those chimneys, like, that was Auschwitz for me. Abominable.

Asked about the most dramatic moment he remembers, this same interviewee concluded the interview with a statement that may have been obvious to him but it was astonishing for us, who had just listened to his long autobiographical story:

Well, that’s what I said already, this is the smoke above the pits where the Jews were being burnt.⁹⁷

96 From the account of Jacek Zieleniewicz, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. ISFLDP_047.

97 From the account (videotaped) of Zbigniew Dłubak, art theorist, photographic artist and painter, shot by movie director Maciej Drygas, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_156. Z. Dłubak’s account, edited and with his earlier unknown paintings made when in the camp, was published in ‘Obieg’ art quarterly, 2006, No. 1 (73).

It is symptomatic that being a direct witness to the Holocaust sometimes turns out to be an experience that is paralysing and, moreover, completely separate and detached from any earlier (and subsequent) prejudices, ideas and concepts, and stereotypes about Jews. This experience comes from a different, deeper, existential level. This is why one of the Interviewees, who would laughingly say whilst evoking his schoolboy years:

I'll tell you something, I was eight, nine years old, can remember those *gudlajs* [= Hymies]. I held them myself by those side-locks, drove them across the park, and whatever else; I can remember that.

can afterwards conclude his account by evoking the camp lot of the Jews, which he finds incomparable with his own traumatic experience of the *kacet*:

That was, sir, the race selected to be annihilated. And there, if he had, of David, that... Star, then he was an enemy at every turn. Well, I personally never held any grudge against them, nor will I hold any. But once a German, or another, saw it, then, shit...⁹⁸

The elements specified above, which are characteristic to the autobiographical accounts of many former Polish KZ inmates, do not form an exhaustive catalogue of what is common or similar in these stories. Instead of extending this list, however, I would like to suggest certain more detailed similarities, singling out some, although not all, survivor accounts: those that we can initially systematise.

Between the elements that reappear in a number of interviews, if not all of them, and what is unique, singular and individual, I identify a medium level, which by no means undermines the other two categories. What I mean here are similar experiences and, at the same time, similar methods in their (re)construction, which differentiate the various groups of prisoners/narrators. This recognition, based on the analysis of the accounts obtained, audio and videotaped recordings heard or watched, and a repeated reading of the transcripts of not only my own interviews, points to the following three 'types' of camp experience, seen in the perspective of autobiographical narrations (thus, the 'types' also refer to narratives). The length of time spent in the camp is the factor that most strongly distinguishes the 'types', and groups of inmates, from one another. There are, usually, other overlapping differences, many strictly interrelated with the length of time in the camp, and somehow dependent upon it. Let us try and distinguish these differences.

98 From the account of Sylwin Józwiak, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_027.

3.1 'Low-numbers'

Long-term prisoners, with the greatest seniority, who spent almost the entire war in the *kacet* – less (or more, for some) than five years. This group is very sparse today among the surviving Mauthausen survivors, and it is obviously the oldest group: those who were born in the second decade of the past century. Today, if they are still alive (most of those to whom we talked are now gone), they are around one hundred in age. Although their group is so sparse, it remains manifest. Their voice is audible in autobiographical accounts taped in Poland as part of the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project.⁹⁹

This group consists of survivors who were detained at the camp as adults, mature people. But age is not their only common bond. A definite majority, and certainly all my Interviewees within this group, are identifiable with the Polish pre-war intelligentsia. Leaving aside the perpetual discussion around the question of who is to be included or excluded, how to define this social class, and so on, I assume for my present purpose a simple and pragmatic criterion, considering the Polish intelligentsia of the period as those who had passed their high-school finals (so-called maturity examinations) and had been to college, or intended to do so, before World War II. This is an important aspect of the social context they functioned in, and contributed to. One of the Interviewees starts his autobiographical account as follows:

Born: April 15th, 1919, in Warsaw. Father a doctor, elder brother a doctor... // Before the war, I studied at [a] Philosophy [Department] for two years, under Professor [Tadeusz] Kotarbiński, among others, under the famous philosopher of, still, the Lvov school of philosophy – Professor [Władysław] Witwicki. // The known name[s]. // I studied before the war for those two years, for I got my high-school finals at '[Mikołaj] Rej' [Grammar School], in 1937, as I failed to pass my entrance exams for medicine twice in a row, in two academic years, meaning, until the war I didn't manage to get in. In spite of the fact that in both cases I had passed my first-year exam with 'good', but there were a few hundred others like me, and there were one hundred places, plus ten for Jews. So, one hundred and ten altogether. And in the second year, meaning right before the war, in the academic year '38/'39, that is, the second year after my finals, I failed to get enrolled again, for there were eight hundred and several dozen candidates altogether, with 110 [places], of which at least half passed the exam just like me, with 'very good'.¹⁰⁰

99 Out of 164 biographical interviews recorded as part of the Project in Poland, twenty-four were with prisoners who had been detained in a *kacet* since 1940 (which required much effort, as they were the most difficult to reach).

100 From the account of Stanisław Pręgowski, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_003.

The oldest of our Interviewees, those born nearer to the year 1910, were in the midst of their studies at, or had graduated from, a university or college, teacher training college, officer cadet school, or theological seminary. Some worked before the war, doing jobs typical of intellectuals, as teachers, officials or clerks, lawyers, etc. Some established families. Many joined the ranks of the Polish Army to resist the German invasion in 1939 – and this military episode became their only clear memory from the wartime period, beside their time in the camp, of course. Some wanted to join the campaign of the Defence War but did not manage to. The first days and weeks of the war often marked their experience of the first repressive measures, with a collective as well as individual trajectory:

As chance would have it, when the war broke out, together with my brother-in-law, who was assistant lecturer at Poznań University, we resolved to volunteer, around the beginning of September [1939], for the RKU [District Military Draft Office] in Konin. It turned out, once we reported there, that there was no RKU. They had us sent off to Kolno, and from Kolno – to Kutno, and when we found ourselves in Kutno, the battle on the Bzura was going on around us. Near Kutno, that's the battle on the Bzura. This being the case, we decided to go to Warsaw, for in Warsaw there was an uncle of my wife's and we thought we might survive the war there. Believing constantly that there would be a front in the West, that the war would come to an end without a disaster. Meanwhile, the war ended up a disaster, and September the seventeenth saw us detained at my paternal uncle's in Grochów [a borough of Warsaw]. I stayed for some time in the military barracks at Mińsk Mazowiecki, and then, in an Ostrołęka prison; till the first of October '39 I was continuously led out to the [train] station in Ostrołęka, as they were to take us away to some camp in Prussia, but the trains that were meant to transport us were coming back from the East, filled with the loot they took from that area, machinery and appliances of various sorts. And they didn't manage to dispatch us, until the moment the Russian troops came nearer to Ostrołęka. This being the case, we were led out of that prison, to Czerwony-Bór, machineguns were deployed and we were told to escape into the woods, and to the Soviet side. We fled but met no Soviet soldiers. And I decided that from that place, via Ostrów, along the paths I was familiar with, where I had once driven a bike, I would go back to my mother, to Maków Mazowiecki. And in Maków Mazowiecki, I was arrested on the sixth of April.¹⁰¹

Most were arrested in the spring (very many, in April) and summer of 1940, as part of the so-called preventive action against the Polish intelligentsia, called by its Nazi instigators and executors the *Präventive-Aktion gegen polnische Intelligenz* (or, *Polen Aktion*). There is no need to add that the keyword '*Präventiv*' was a cynical

101 From the account of Stanisław Dobosiewicz, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_014.

euphemism, so typical for Nazi newspeak, as identified on an on-going basis by Victor Klemperer, who called this language *Lingua Tertii Imperii*.¹⁰² What 'prevention' most often meant in such cases was a sequence of the following repressive measures: arrest, sometimes in a brutal manner, and detention in a prison or transit camp. Depending on the place of arrest, it could be either the Pawiak prison in Warsaw, Fort VII in Poznań, Radogoszcz in Łódź, Działdowo, Szczeglin, Tarnów, Sanok, Kalisz, of Stutthof, for Polish residents of the coastal area.¹⁰³ The full list of such locations is much longer. Some were transported immediately after being arrested, setting off for one of the 'old', 'exemplary' concentration camps in the Reich territory: Dachau or Sachsenhausen, in most cases, and subsequently, having been in quarantine for a several weeks, were dispatched to Mauthausen, or directly to Gusen, its largest subcamp.

Let us pause for a while to consider the experience of arrest and detention. Identification as a member of the intelligentsia was a sufficient enough reason for this, even without involvement in any anti-Nazi conspiratorial activities (though this also happened, quite often). This is a crucial moment for determining the ensuing identity as a prisoner:

Well, and I was in Warsaw... Just like the youth at the time, // the curfew, so there, with a few of my colleagues, we went out to a café in the afternoon. It was a coffee shop, among other things, on 29th April, the year '40, at the 'Bodega' café, together with two friends of mine, one acquaintance a girl, we were having our coffee, around the afternoon hours. The Bodega café was, you know, as you enter, a hundred metres from Aleje Jerozolimskie Ave., to the left, as you go toward Krakowskie Przedmieście St., in the backyard, and downstairs. There was the Milano Precinct first, and then, down the hill, downstairs, further up there, was the Bodega café, where the very good band the Brodziński Brothers performed, the well-known one. Well, good then, // we were sitting there, suddenly, those few steps from at the upper level, [the door] opened and S[S]-men entered: 'Alle Männer Hände hoch! Aus(?), Hände hoch, die Mädchen können sitzen bleiben.' Oh, we raised our hands, they led us away, to a truck. Three days at Dzielna Street, in 'Serbia' [former women's prison, adjacent to Pawiak] at the Pawiak, and on May the second, I should think, May the second, the

102 V. Klemperer, *LTI – Lingua Tertii Imperii: Notizbuch eines Philologen*: such was the title of the first edition, published in 1947 in Germany. See also P. Levi's remarks on LTI in his *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 97 ff.

103 See the account of Zbigniew Filarski, a student of Architecture at the Gdansk University of Technology, who was arrested together with his father, sister and brother on 14th November 1939 and imprisoned at the Stutthof concentration camp. In April 1940, Mr Filarski was dispatched to Sachsenhausen and, shortly afterwards, to Gusen, where he was kept till liberation day; available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_058 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner).

first transport to Sachsenhausen/Oranienburg. The first thousand prisoners, one thousand Poles they took from mass seizures also from a few other locations, from some other cafés, like us from the 'Bodega' ... On the sly, wasn't it?¹⁰⁴

The people who spent five years of their lives at a *Lager*, only because they had been marked as intellectuals by the Nazis and punished for this very fact, could not explain their situation as prisoners as the consequence of struggle or resistance, with this as the punishment. So, they had to try to identify other meanings for their trajectories. The status as member of the intelligentsia was at times, in a way, an additional burden within the camp – primarily, in their relations with the other inmates who, having assumed their camp functions, gained an opportunity to get something back, show who is in power now, mock and deride those who in the normal world, before the camp, were much higher up in the social hierarchies. A trace of such aversion is visible also in Stanisław Grzesiuk's *Pięć lat kacetu*, an important book on Gusen.

Another typical experience: a short stay in one of the oldest Nazi concentration camps is most frequently evoked in these narratives as an important aspect of the individual's socialisation, preceding the long years of their 'career' as a prisoner. Not only because this was where initiation into the *Lager* and the first quarantine (assembly, physical training, singing) and, in some cases, the first labour assignment, took place:

As I already said, from Szczeglin, they brought us to Dachau. As I already mentioned, these experiences, that first sight of the people harnessed to those great, great rollers, which beat down the street [surface]. This is difficult to recount, when a man, snatched from freedom, sees hell all at once. Some people walking with such sticks, lashes, well, and there began the first Gehenna of my stay in the camp. At a real concentration camp, then, as Szczeglin was a transit one, it was a grange, like, an estate. There, in the Dachau camp, enormous discipline; I worked there with the *Gärtnerkommando*, we carried the earth for the garden plots. Often we would sit for hours and hours, singing various songs, learning our German. Severity that was out of this world. We daydreamed of freedom, but unfortunately the freedom wouldn't come.¹⁰⁵

There were rare cases where inmates volunteered to be transported to Mauthausen, to do stone dressing, expecting to find conditions there more bearable compared to those in the camp they were at. These hopes turned out to be misconceived. Little wonder, then, the figure of an older and wiser prisoner who warned against going to the stone pit was so strongly connected with this – erroneous – decision:

104 From the account of Stefan Pręgowski, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_003.

105 From the account of Waclaw Milke, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_019.

And I'm saying, 'I probably have to fly away from this Buchenwald to somewhere else, go to another camp.' There was an opportunity, there was an announcement that you could apply as *Steinmetzers* [stonemasons/stonecutters], as professional workmen, up to the age of such and such. And I applied for it. Now, they set us up in the roll-call ground for the departure, and the block guard comes over, I'm telling the truth: an alien man; he was crying, spilling tears; says he, 'Stay here. You're not going to Mauthausen: the place you're going to is a *Mordhausen*...' For they knew it, for they had been kept there for several years. They knew, those block guards, the air you'd sniff in this camp or the other. He begged me not to go, but I'd already made up my mind, and went to Mauthausen.

Elsewhere, this man says bitterly:

They were not humans but bandits in Mauthausen, and they were humans in Buchenwald. This was the difference.¹⁰⁶

This initial stage of a prisoner 'career' is sometimes clearly remembered exactly because one could at that point meet and establish contacts with the elder prisoners. Firstly, with those older in age, brought by the same 'intelligentsia' transport, which also carried prisoners much older than our Interviewees, including teachers, writers, scholars, artists, doctors, and engineers. Secondly, with those who were older in terms of camp seniority, being detained at the camp for several years.

It chanced that I found a place for myself in the kitchen beside a pre-war writer, a very famous one. His name was Karol Morcinek, or Kazimierz, I can't remember now.¹⁰⁷ As a Polish philologist, I had him invited to meetings with young people in Pabianice and Słupca. So, I reintroduced myself to him and from that moment on, we chatted, quite agreeably, while peeling potatoes for a few days. I was astonished by one thing: Morcinek, who travelled to Germany before the war, was convinced that the Germans would win – not only as they had won against Poland, but also against France, against which the war was at the time, mind you. He believed the war could last for five years; that if America did not join, then the Germans would surely be the winners; that they would then defeat Russia. And, what was the mood among the inmates? When I went back to my block, I was in block 13, which we explained to ourselves wrongly, because of [unlucky] thirteen, yes. When I went back and told them what Morcinek had said, all my colleagues, and those arrested from Maków alongside me, the teachers, protested horribly against me. Some of them with very indecent

106 From the account of Tadeusz Różycki, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_042 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner).

107 My Interviewee eventually recalled the writer's first name – Gustaw (born Augustyn). Gustaw Morcinek was an eminent Polish fiction author of Silesian background, who was imprisoned in Sachsenhausen and Dachau.

words, too. How dare I repeat such things, the war will certainly end in a victory. Germany shall fall, and we shall return home....

So, I was so mistreated for repeating what Morcinek said. But I told him this, [and] he said that these sorts of thing are said by naive people. He was convinced that he was right. ... But on 25th of May, we were gathered at the camp ground in Dachau and the officers in SS uniforms were surveying us, and pulling us out of the ranks. All those who had been pulled out were dispatched to Gusen. I can remember one symptomatic scene. When we, those selected, were back in our block to take our belongings for the trip to Mauthausen, then my block guard, the old communist, said that we should bear in mind that we're going the highest-class camp, the heaviest one. One where a great effort [would be needed] to survive, but we should believe that the truth has been said, // he quoted it to us, // the truth has been said by Shakespeare, that there is no night after which the sun will not shine. The sun shall also shine for us. And so, with such optimism, in a way, we set off for Gusen.¹⁰⁸

A subtle smile and look of affection appeared on my Interviewee's face as he uttered these words, suggesting that this is not irony or black humour but rather, a specific way of interpreting his *Lager* experience, and adding sense to this fragment of his biography. This very experience is approached as an integral fragment of the biographies – this perhaps being the major distinguishing feature of the autobiographical narratives of this particular group of former prisoners. A fragment that, as a rule, is much better integrated, understood, and internalised than in the case of other survivors. The five years spent at the *kacet* and the conclusive survival of it are rarely evoked by these specific inmates as an episode detached from the rest of their lives, one of the wartime adventures, or a 'biographical breach'. Conversely, this experience forms part of their biographies, and adds to their continuity. Not only *were* they in the camp but they lived in it, with all the related ambiguity. Therefore, their stories, when compared with the voices of the other survivors, resemble at many moments reports on regular life lived outside of the barbed wire. Apart from the whole hellish reality of the *Lager*, featured in (almost) all the narratives, this group of accounts offers numerous zoom-ins of the various practices and institutions, imitating their corresponding entities in the ordinary, off-camp universe: prayer, sports, artistic/literary activity, learning, conversations, song. Not all of the narrators participated in these activities, certainly not to an equal degree. But all members of the group in question did see it and know about it. These dimensions of the *Lager* universe, lesser known to us, were known to them.

Moreover, what these stories most distinctly reveal is the process of growing and being an (increasingly elder/senior) inmate; the process of learning, domesticating the totalitarian institution. It is a slow process, stretched out over time,

108 From the account of Stanisław Dobosiewicz, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_014.

following a course that was not in a straight line. They had that time given to them: this is one possible perspective of those who have outlived it. That this process and transformation were available to them is part of their experience.

The oldest prisoners know the history of the camp the best; and, they often recount it, intertwining their autobiographical accounts with it. This knowledge is partly of a later date, and thus 'external' to what they actually experienced there and then. Partly, however, this knowledge is built upon the experience in question. These prisoners were in a camp that in the end proved to be completely different from the one they subsequently left. As their position within the inmate community changed, and as they were changing as individuals, so was the micro-universe they were thrown into. This change/transformation was taking place at multiple levels: from the purely external, topographical, through to the physical conditions of living and doing work, up to the mutual relationships between the inmates, and those between the inmates and the crew. The *kacet*, in their accounts, appears not to be a static institution that is not subject to change, one where the same horrifying rituals are merely a reperformable daily routine; it is, instead, a dynamic, albeit long-lasting, transformation process. The experience of participation in that process, the current – particularly, if retrospective – observation of it, combined with reflection upon the place occupied by the narrator within it, all contribute to the unique perspective from which the *Lager* is perceivable by its elder inmates.

This point of view means that many of them feel themselves to be the host of the *Lager* – however strange this might sound. The fact that they participated in the subsequent phases of the camp's functioning, often almost from the very beginning till the very last day, and, moreover, that they constructed the camp on barely barren land, and survived the first, toughest years, gives them a sense of a peculiar domestication. It also gives them access to a kind of mystery that is unattainable or unapproachable for those who 'walked into a ready-made position'. This initiation usually appears in autobiographical narratives in either of the two ways and, possibly, both at once: the narrator highlights his or her low camp number and/or emphasises that he or she was member of the first builders' group:

The construction of the camp, inside: the barracks, barracks, roll-call grounds, social area. ... Later on, I joined the group of 170 people and we were building a housing settlement for the quarries at St. Georgen. St. Georgen is a small town, very pleasant. I liked walking there, because as I walked, you could meet deer, tamed, as it were. They had no fear for humans, they walked across the streets to the small forest, played around in the meadow...

The works were progressing. You had to make the foundations, the long-strip footing, the shuttering, the ceilings were poured [with concrete], not slabs; reinforced, underpinned. I was made a builder, by force of fact. One tragic moment was when we built the ceiling wrong, without underpinning it properly. We're walking, and can see it from the street: it collapsed. Jesus Christ, we know what that means – we've screwed it up! Before they could shout, we rushed to dismantle it completely, so it would be invisible. [*laughs*] No one spotted anything. Or maybe they did, but

pretended that none of the interested parties could see it: the *Baumeister*, the *Kapo*, the *Oberkapo* who assigned the tasks and knew about everything. We quickly dismantled it, and, [started] anew. Snip, bang, chop! – done. I was the main pundit for those matters. One [of them] was a tanner; another, a priest; yet another, an engine driver. I gathered them all, and managed [the team]. Somehow it worked out. We made the cellars, poured the ceilings – all in order, fixed, done.¹⁰⁹

And now, a grimmer experience of labour, and the overwhelming conditions:

I was merely shocked by the terrific primitiveness and chaos, compared to Dachau. As I saw those wooden barracks made of planks, unpadding, the street paths were merely set, unhardened, there was ordinary ground. It was dry, it was good, but when the rainy days came later on, the mud was ankle-deep. An open cesspit was dug near each of the barracks, fastened with rails to serve as a toilet-seat and to hold [yourself] up, as an abutment. And there was one tap with running water for the whole barrack.¹¹⁰

The hopeless situation during the first moments after arrival is evoked in a number of these stories. This emphasises that those senior inmates were the only ones who encountered the *Lager* conditions in their worst form, as a very peculiar building site:

Gusen was only just being built. This is probably the worst moment, when you arrive at a camp of this sort. A concentration camp, subsequently called a camp of, de facto, extermination, and a camp under construction. Well, [we] were gathered in that, so-called, roll-call ground, we saw some barracks standing there, a lot of construction materials, boards, bricks. The roll-call ground was not hardened yet, just sand. ... Our block was a tiny barrack made up of slats. The boards were such that the outside showed through.¹¹¹

The oldest of our Interviewees often call Gusen the camp for the Poles or, more frequently, the camp for the Polish intelligentsia. Or, they quote the German description, which suffices for the *Lager*'s earliest period: *Vernichtungslager für polnische Intelligenz* (i.e. extermination/annihilation camp for Polish intelligentsia). Indeed, Poles accounted for the largest group of its prisoners. The first transport of Polish prisoners arrived there from Buchenwald (via Mauthausen) on as early as 9 March 1940; the following, with 1,084 people, came from Dachau. Poles accounted for most of the Gusen victims, too. Emphasising the ‘Polish’ profile of this particular

109 From the account of Jan Wagner, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_026 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner).

110 From the account of Telesfor Matuszak, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_105 (recorded by Michał Zarzycki).

111 From the account of Janusz Gajewski, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_132 (recorded by Dorota Pazio).

camp is today an important element of the collective memory and commemorative practices of the milieu of the former inmates of the Mauthausen camp system. Obviously, it contained not only Polish inmates, as the camp has multiple national memories: Spanish, French, Czech, Russian, Italian, to evoke just a few. The most prominent are featured at the celebrations of the consecutive anniversaries of the liberation, held annually on the site of the former camp, in the middle of a charming locality named Gusen, right where the camp was built.

Very frequently, these oldest prisoners emphatically refer to the fact that Mauthausen-Gusen was officially classified by the Nazis in January 1941 as a so-called concentration camp of the last, third, grade (*Stufe III*) – one of the most stringent rigour, particularly severe conditions, and potentially highest mortality rate. This was the only camp classed as such at that time.¹¹²

The beginning of the camp route at Gusen was almost identical for all Poles arriving with these first transports: constructing the camp infrastructure; working in the quarries; stone dressing. The camp was constructed in order to mine and exploit the deposits of quality granite, using pre-existing or newly created stone pits. Hitler's design was to use the stone for the construction of 'his' cities; one such city was Nuremberg, with its enormous *Reichsparteitagsgelände* – rally grounds for the Nazi party. The inmates who worked at the Gusen quarries tend to emphasise this purpose of the granite they were mining. Their awareness of this fact is possibly later, but it helps rationalise the labour experience:

In that camp, when I was moved to the *Steinmetzer* floor, I was very quickly taught by one of the Poles who worked there how to machine the stone slabs, the large ones. Our camp had a bog contract with the SS Headquarters for the production of granite stone, with which Hitler's great stadium in Nuremberg was to be built, projected to be the world's largest stadium, one that could hold 150,000 spectators, where celebrations were to be held We initially processed those great slabs of at least a metre in length, half-a-metre in width, and you machined the face, that is, the front, but you had to smoothen it so it could fit at the appropriate point. So, you were given the pattern according to which you needed to do [it]. You had to work carefully, as with any inadvertent processing of the top, that external section, it was easy to knock off the rim. And then, you'd lose everything, you'd lose it. And for that, there was a punishment: from five to twenty-five lashes with a, what do you call it? Used for dogs – the thong, not the thong; well, like, a whip, scourge. The bullwhip.¹¹³

112 According to the Nazi classification, Grade 1 camps (e.g. Dachau) were devised for 'less incriminated and unconditionally re-educable protective custody prisoners'; Grade 2, for 'heavily incriminated, but still re-educable prisoners' (e.g. Buchenwald); and, Grade 3 – for 'heavily incriminated incorrigibles and criminals with previous convictions as well as asocial persons, i.e. to all intents and purposes non re-educable prisoners' (e.g. Mauthausen/Gusen).

113 From the account of Stanisław Dobosiewicz, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_014.

Only the beginning was the same for everybody: the subsequent camp experiences appear increasingly varied, and this diversity is difficult to show here. It is more important to recognise what is characteristic to this group of survivors, what I have already mentioned: the process of becoming an 'old *Häftling*', a 'low number'. This marked a gradual adaption to living within the *Lager* world, always connected with performing better, lighter work, even if within the same 'occupation'. Some processed stone until the liberation; but even in their case, the memory of the work performed in 1945 is not quite like the story of their first labour in the camp, in 1940:

My colleague and I formed a group of two stone-machine workers. With the use of a tiny chisel and a small hammer, I would carve a small groove along that line, so if it rained, the trace made by the civil foreman would not be washed off. At a distance of around every ten centimetres, my colleague bore, with a pneumatic hammer, holes that were ten, twelve centimetres [deep]. With a hammer that made the holes with compressed air. As we made these holes along that line, every ten centimetres, I, as his assistant, would insert tiny cast-iron wedges into these holes, knocking them with my hammer, and that rock, that shapeless solid, splintered, so that the place where it separated was even, like a sheet of paper. Thus, the foremen could see how the stone was constructed inside. When my colleague became tired with hammering, for this required much energy, we swapped. He made the grooves, I was making the holes. I worked there as a *Bohrer* till the end of my stay.

Many, however, did a series of different jobs in the course of their inmate 'career':

After that work, I worked as a *Steinmetzer* with a number of other *Kommandos*. That is to say, I worked on the regulation works for the river Gusen, which was not far from our camp. We dredged the river there. That was also very pleasant work, for our *Kommandoführer* S[S]-man was a very tolerant man, nobody was lashed by him. The *Kapos* were also very likeable, given the German *Kapo* standard. The mood there was very good. And I always had nice recollections of that work, till my last days at the camp. Because the *Kommandoführer*, being German, an SS-man, was a very quiet, pleasant man, and the *Kapos* were likeable too. After the Gusen River regulation was completed, I returned to the camp, and started looking for another job The point was not to get beaten, and for the work not to be hard. I worked with a few other *Kommandos*. Finally, I got to a *Kommando* which built big underground factories. We drilled tunnels and factory floors in the mountainside, not far from Gusen. In those tunnels, they began assembling fuselages a year later. That work was not so hard. The only thing was that, as the Poles, the inmates, who had working there for some years told us, the work was actually not quite safe. These rocks hollowed by the prisoners fell away from time to time, and crushed, those rocks, the people and the equipment, and the trolleys used for removing the debris outside. Fortunately, nothing bad happened to me there. The war was coming, little by little, to an end anyway.

Some of the senior prisoners pointedly evoke the important moment when the functioning of the camp was redesigned: rather than stone mining, assembling

aircraft in underground tunnels became the main economic purpose. Many of them found better jobs for themselves in one of the armaments factories. The fact that the work performed there required an apprenticeship or training, some relevant competencies, is extremely important. Apart from the *Kapos*, or instead of them, the workers were often supervised by civil foremen. To train an inmate took some energy and time. More individualised relationships could develop in such circumstances. It was worth not losing this asset, as the priority had already switched from exploiting the prisoners for exploitation's sake to intensified armament production. Entangled in this business were the interests of specific armament companies, which manufactured the equipment by using prisoner labour. This switch in priorities saved quite a few prisoners. It means a perceptible (although not to all, obviously) change in the way the inmate workmen were dealt with – particularly by the *Kapos*, who could no longer kill their *Häftlings* with impunity as this would result in a loss to the workforce, something that those in charge were now not in a position to afford.¹¹⁴

Some among the senior inmates managed to be offered the particularly privileged posts: the minor functions of gardener; block scribe; interpreter; surveyor; kitchen worker; hospital assistant; SS sickroom masseurs. There was a number of such functions and performing them was often connected with frequent, individualised contacts with members of the SS crew. Characteristically, as the unrestrained autobiographical narrative unfolds, this experience of privileged status is not infrequently kept in the background, playing second fiddle in the story of the inmate's severe hardships – those from the first days, weeks or months of detention. This is, perhaps, why it is only the latter ones that easily fit the (stereo)typical history of survivor, who unambiguously remains perceived as a victim throughout, in any and all situations. On the level of the interview, as an interactive situation, this can be interpreted as the Interviewees shunning a narrative that could expose them to a loss of face,¹¹⁵ to the potential disapproval of some of their camp-time behaviours, attitudes or roles. Even more often they tend to protect or defend their camp mates – so as to completely prevent their goodwill as former camp inmates from being affected by the faintest tinge of doubt.

This type of interview situation only relates to some of the individuals investigated. The others do not activate such inhibiting measures, make no objections or reservations, or ask for the taping equipment to be switched off. This group of Interviewees treats us as mature listeners, and they freely continue their narrative on the subsequent stages of their *Lager* route. Yet, they also might pause

114 The moment of the shift is particularly highlighted in, amongst others, the account of Jerzy Wandel, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_001. For more on this point, see P. Levi, op. cit., p. 46.

115 Not in a colloquial sense but in the one proposed by Goffman; see Erving Goffman, 'On Face-work: An Analysis of the ritual elements in social interactions', *Psychiatry* 18(3), 1955, pp. 213–231.

to reconsider, from time to time: “Please do not let everybody know, because the people might interpret it in a completely different way”.

As I am willing to consent to this request, let me quote, instead of a conspicuous image, another passage, recounting the experience of a senior, privileged inmate assigned the job of gardener:

One day, [as] we’re still standing aligned, he comes up, van Loosen,¹¹⁶ and asks if there’s a *Rasensetzer* among us in here, that is, the one who does the sodding. I’m saying to myself: I’m an old scout, I got awards for arranging various flowerbeds; so I stepped forward. The *Oberkapo* ushered me over and ordered that I do the sodding around the locks, so that some flowers could be planted, something like that. My leg was hurting! I had had my brace taken off already, but my leg was still stiff, I was doing exercises, fastening a stone to it, to exercise it. He led me there, I’m making the flowerbeds by these blocks. My mates were bringing the sod, and I was doing the sodding. I was the boss, sort of, but I was doing the jigsaw for myself. As I was doing it, it was almost fine, ‘cause the block guard would go, serve me a bowl of soup, which he’d had left over, sometimes a piece of bread, extra. I had [it] for myself and for my colleagues who were with me there. This lasted for some time. Of those blocks how many I rearranged I cannot remember, they were very decently done. The *Arbeitsdienstführer* is walking past one day, the one who took care of the gardeners’ *Kommando* (*Gärtnerkommando*). He’s walking past, watching, walks past me, and says to me, ‘*Bist du Gärtner von Beruf?*’ [Are you a gardener by profession?]. I reply, ‘*Jawohl!*’ [Yes, sir.] What else could I reply? – ‘*Welche Spezialität haben Sie?*’ I got it somehow, and what I said was, ‘*Meine Spezialität ist Blumengärtner.*’ He replies, ‘*Mensch! Das brauche ich so eine. Von Morgen kommen Sie zu mein Kommando.*’ [Man! I need one like that. As from tomorrow, come join my *Kommando*.] The following day, of course, I’m no longer going to the *Lagerkommando*, to van Loosen, but to the *Kommando* of the *Gärtner* instead. There, the point was that I was a specialist, the *Blumengärtner*, near *Führerheim*, it was a sort of ground where a garden needed to be laid. He took me there, and gave [= delegated] there one more mate of that *Kommando* of gardeners. We were arranging everything according to plan. We stayed in touch with the proper gardener. He was a teacher by profession, but knew his way around horticulture, he had kept a vegetable garden. He assisted us in all those matters, we sought advice from him, and other things too. We planted a number of shrubs, flowers, other things, the garden was ready. It was there that I worked afterwards, in that garden. That was, obviously, a much easier task.¹¹⁷

116 Van Loosen was a *Kapo* and one of the greatest torturers in Gusen; his name reappears in a number of former inmate accounts; characteristically, most references to him are found in the accounts of the oldest inmates, who best knew the concrete *Kapos* and SS men, by their first names and surnames.

117 From the account of Waclaw Pilarski, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_125 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner).

A privileged position such as this was sometimes used as an opportunity to arrange help for fellow inmates. This thread permanently appears in this group of accounts, one probable reason being that such assistance is considered by the narrators to be an excuse for their holding such a privileged position. It enables the narrator to explain their reasons to their interviewer (unnecessarily) and to themselves (perhaps most importantly). Let us follow a subsequent fragment of this same account, as transcribed, in order to take a closer look at this characteristic combination of both threads within a sense-making and logical narrative. In this conception, membership in the camp elite means camp service, done at the peril of one's life.

At Führerheim, they were bringing food for the S[S]-men, but for the higher-ranking ones, warrant officers, officers of the S[S]. As they were bringing the food, something would always be left in the cauldrons. We were walking, with my mate, with buckets to fetch water, you'd pour the water. We worked, our camp organisation was operational. We got the task of passing one pail per day to the quarry. A colleague was there to collect it. Well, and so we did this. You'd put the food inside the pail, and leave it aside. Our mate set up the stones by himself, made a screen. ... In this way we passed on the buckets, the bread...

Once, those S[S]-men were hungry, ate everything, [left] the cauldrons empty. We told our colleagues this, and they said: "Don't wait till they've eaten then, but just as they bring it in, pour it out at once." And that's what I did. They brought that food, and no pouring anymore, but just putting the pail into the cauldron, and that's it; as much as could be ladled, I took away. You'd just lift it up, and fill it. The German who had his booth there, he walked one way, then another, and thus you had to target it.

I'm with the pail, it so happens, he turns, whistles to call me. My colleague left the pail, as he's escaped, and I am there by the fence. And so, the show is over. Then I say to myself, my life's finished. He obviously came up, took the pail off, and noted down my number...

Earlier on there'd been an incident once we already had flowers in our garden, when one of the chiefs of the S[S]-men's company comes over to me and says, '*Gärtner, besorge Sie mir ein Blumen [?]. Meine Frau morgen hatte Geburtstag.*' I'm saying that I cannot give them [the flowers] to him, for he has to bring me a permit from the camp Commandant. '*Noch mir, ich [?] das Brot.*' I say that I'm afraid. '*Kein Angst, kein Angst.*' We made an agreement. I say, 'I'll lay the flowers under that bush, and you'll bring the bread [and put it] also under that bush.' I made up the flowers, put them there for him, he came, took the flowers, I took the bread, and, everything's fine. That was repeated perhaps two, three times.

Now, as he caught me with the pail, I recalled to myself. I had never been to an S[S] barrack. I enter that barrack, the machine guns are standing upright, arrayed. Like in any barrack, here's the door, there's the door. Only that I knew which door, for I had once brought him flowers, to the window. I had reckoned it to myself before that it's going to be this door. I entered the barrack. I knock on the door. I hear, 'Come in!' Well, then I open it. As he saw me, he said, '*Was machts du hier?*' He started shouting at me, that I'm not supposed to enter this place, that there are machine guns, how did

I enter?! He scolded me for a while or so. I say that something unfortunate happened, that I was passing a pail to my colleagues, to the quarry, with food inside, and the guard who is there took down my number and took the pail away. I say, 'Looks like I won't be able to bring you flowers, Commander.' He rebuked me and says to me, just go away, and never do anything like this ever again. He saw me as far as the door. He led me through the whole barrack, fifty metres' long. I went off, and only afterwards realised. If I hadn't been in such shock, I wouldn't have walked in there. I thought to myself than that's the end of the story of my life...

After such an incident, I ought to have been hanging somewhere on a pole, or been reassigned a *Kommando*, or, to a penal company. There were a thousand different things, but there was the belief in surviving somehow... You did things, although you knew you were not supposed to, but you had to do them in order to bring your mate a piece of bread, a bowl of soup. We didn't stop passing the soup at all. We passed it to one another, just in a different way, from a different side of the fence, not above but below it. In this way, as I'm saying, under such circumstances, where you were exposed to death, somehow you managed it, and survived.¹¹⁸

These extensive fragments – from a much longer, multithreaded micro-story – are worth quoting as a number of accounts of one's own privileged status in the camp have been constructed in a similar manner. Their pivot is a painstaking climb up the camp career ladder. Not quite a ladder, really: climbing a steep rock, it would be more appropriate to say – with falls sometimes happening, alongside help offered by others. Not only by other inmates but also by so-called good Germans, including good, or decent, SS-men. Over time, one becomes able to extend such a helping hand to those who perform poorly while climbing, or who have begun their climb at a later point.

Rather frequently, attaining a better position is preceded by a fall from higher up and a closeness to death. This is sometimes evoked in terms of a psychological crisis, a loss of faith in the point of climbing, breakdown, suicidal thoughts. It was not only the eldest prisoners who had such thoughts; those who were a little younger, who were a few years behind them in the camp, were also affected; the duration of their stay was still long enough for a radical fall to occur in their camp career. Such a fall is followed by a rising.

I say, I'm going to end my life. There was an inmate walking by. 'Off you go, off you go.' I was eighteen then, no facial hair. I don't know what, why, a miracle? 'Off you go, the war's going to end! There'll be no war in three months' time! What're you up to? Suicide?! There's no war!' I say, 'I cannot walk. Have you got a piece of bread?' 'I have.' There was a *Kommando* at block 12 who caught fish in the Danube. They walked with a net. There they dried and roasted [the fish], in the bathroom. [One of them] says, 'Roast yours'; well, I burnt the bread to a cinder.

118 Ibidem.

What power did I regain! I had been so subjugated that I was powerless. When he said, 'The war is over in three months', I don't know how come that force was sparked. I took that coal, spread it. I kept all that. A happy man.¹¹⁹

This motif of 'going to the wire' (i.e. throwing oneself onto the wire) constantly reappears in survivors' stories, particularly those of long-term prisoners. They would frequently witness the following occurrence:

The camp was surrounded with high-voltage barbed wire. In Gusen, there was somebody going onto this wire, to find deliverance, almost daily. Even one of our co-brethren, a seminary student, went too, a young lad, a violinist, a very joyous man. He was completely languished, believed himself the worst among the sinners.¹²⁰

Yet, there are accounts where, in line with what researchers into *Lager* reality have found, the survivors emphasise that instances of suicide were a rarity in the camp; this is true even for suicide attempts:

You were beaten, you stood up and pawed the wall, but still wanted to live. I have never met a man who would say to me, 'I'm going onto the wire, I'm fed up.'¹²¹

More frequently, however, it is not one's own choice but a matter of being pushed down, downgraded, a concussion from the outside that causes a fall and suddenly brings one closer to death – the danger that had seemed remote for a while. In a flashback, this experience of falling is also constructed as a warning signal, if not a turning point. Somebody or something helps them narrowly escape death; sobered up, the individual starts from then on to even more actively solicit his or her position, withstand and resist the camp machinery. The stories of this particular moment, the concrete experience of transformation, always refer to an incidental happening or occurrence, a stroke of luck or divine providence. For the narrator, such a story becomes a substantial element of the metaphysics of their own salvation – and, one of the most pronounced fragments of the narrative.

I was a *Dolmetscher* [i.e. interpreter] in there for two-and-a-half, almost three, weeks.
... And, after this two-and-a-half weeks or so, I had my face messed up a few times,

119 From the account of Czesław Oparcik, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_017 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb). Characteristically, an almost identical episode – similarly set within the course of narration, with a similar symbolism and triggering similar emotions – appears in the account of Leon Ceglarz, a long-term Gusen inmate, which I analyse in detail further below, in section 3.

120 From the account of Fr. Marian Żelazek, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_072 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner).

121 From the account of Henryk Biłkowski, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_011 (recorded by Agnieszka Knyt).

and Martik had me sacked. He sacked me for a very simple reason. He wanted me to be like a warder [Polish, *sztubowy*], he lashed down at the Spaniards for any old thing, you get me. And in the beginning, I was pretending, for that was normal, when he is somewhere near, then you shout, '*Du dreck Schweine!*', and so on, and so on, noise and hullabaloo is raised, you lift your hand [to strike] for the hell of it, so he could see. But he at last realised that I had that truncheon, so that I, as the warder would come and whip them, which I didn't do, and so he fired me. And I resumed the carrying, for around a week, eight days, I returned to block 6, to stone carrying. As I was back, // Aha, over that two-weeks-and-a-half, I had eaten my fill, quite; // there was a top-up refill, more bread, margarine; as that block guard was stealing, since he shared his portion with the warder, then it's quite plain how the prisoners were robbed. And to me he always gave a refill and more bread, // so I put on some flesh, a few kilograms, over those goofy two-weeks-and-a-half. And I resumed the stone carrying, with my boy [assistant]. The mates say, 'Stefan, what, shit, Stefan, why, how comes you're here again? How excellent you look. Where've you been, in the sickroom?' And I say, 'No.' // That's exactly it, what I'm recounting to you at this moment, what it was like.

Encouraged by these stories, one famished prisoner resolved to go to the barracks and look for bread in the cabinets of the prominent persons. He was caught, and tortured. He said he was induced to go there by my Interviewee. The ensuing consequences were rather obvious:

Suddenly, '*Dolmetscher von Block neunzehn, antretten!*' [The interpreter from block 19, step out!] runs through the camp. Initially, it didn't quite get through to me, and finally, someone from my block said: 'The *Dolmetscher*, they're calling *you*, aren't they?' ... I enter and see that boy of mine, with whom I carried stones. Beaten, kicked black and blue, semi-conscious, he's lying hunched up, like... As I entered, Martik, the block guard, asks him, '*Das ist der?*' and he's pointing at me. ... From the beating, kicking and so on, the semi-conscious boy pointed me out. Of course, in the normal way: in the face, stool, onto the stool, hands behind. I was hung up on a beam. Yes, they kicked the stool away, but that's a piece of cake. 'Fess up! / I... [*laughs*] What is it that I should own up to? For no reasonable man would [own up] to such nonsense, to have someone, a boy, sent off. I didn't want to admit it. They started beating me ..., [? with the handle] of a shovel. Once I got... // twenty, the twenty-second, or -third, time, // Zbyszek Donimirski, who witnessed this, told me that exactly. I was completely semi-conscious, // no... // I didn't want to fess up. I fainted. When I fainted, then they poured water over me. And then, same thing again: 'Fess up! And I, reportedly, // just as Zbyszek told me, // I cannot recall it. At last, I nodded, 'Yes.' I owned up. And altogether I was given fifty-nine lashes.

This is not where the story ends. The narrator was put onto a harsh construction *Kommando*, but there, during the course of another lashing, some other *Kapo* and the SS-man overseeing the construction site discovered how badly he had previously been tortured. As they had their own scores to settle with the other tormenter, they used the opportunity against him at once. This was a stroke of luck

for my Interviewee: he ended up cured at the *Lager* hospital, an opportunity that enabled him to become, later on, a medical orderly with the Soviet POWs and, afterwards, a masseur for the SS-men.

I returned to the block, the following day in the morning, the *Kommando* was going to Sankt Georgen, for Sankt Georgen was being built, a housing estate for SS-men. ... And me, with this arse of mine, which turned black later on, in only twenty-plus hours. // I've got the spots, after all, they are not big, they are, like, on the two buttocks. // You know, I got to Sankt Georgen, where there was a very bad *Kommando*, because, first, you had to walk three kilometres, though there the labour was fast, for there were blocks getting constructed for S[S]-men, that's also under the stick of the *Kapo*, etc., etc. So I started carrying cement there. And at some point, he swiped the stick at me again, the *Kapo*. And I then said, '*Nich auf Arsch schlagen, Kapo. Nicht auf Arsch schlagen!*' [Don't beat my arse, *Kapo!*]. And he's asking, '*Warum den nicht? Komm mit mir.*' [Why shouldn't I? Come with me.]. Because I was shielding myself, like, with my hands. To the *Kapo*'s shack: '*Zieh deine Hosen unten.*' [Take off your trousers.] As he saw it, and [there] was also the *Unterscharführer*, // supervising the construction site on the SS's behalf. As they both together saw my black backside, they grabbed their heads in disbelief, and that *Unterscharführer*, who was a sort of decent man too, immediately.....

But since Helmut Becker who had beaten me was disliked by the fellow-prisoners, including a large share of the Germans, his colleagues, as well as the S[S]-men, those who were in touch with the inmates, that is, the *Blockführers*... ... Coincidentally, that one, the *Unterscharführer* to whom I showed my arse, says, 'Who beat you like this?' And I say, 'The *Lagerältester*.' 'Becker?' I say, '*Jawohl!*'¹²²

This is not yet an end of the story, where the Interviewee's memory opens further and more new threads are conjoined into one coherent story. We can pause at this point, as we can now see quite well that the attained position was never given for good; it was extremely easy to lose one's function, and slide down the camp hierarchies (if not to be killed immediately). Such a fall is a reappearing motif in these stories. Or, as in the previously quoted gardener's account, there is a risk of such a fall, a fear of it. Once lost, the position is virtually unregainable: the area has been 'scorched'. One then has to seek another, possibly no worse, position elsewhere. Sometimes, the outcome is successful.

There were situations where it was particularly difficult or completely impossible to regain a position. The moment a senior inmate was moved to another camp created a situation that was completely different from the aforementioned short-term stays at Sachsenhausen or Dachau at the very beginning of the camp journey. It is also different when compared to the situation faced by those prisoners who

122 From the account of Stefan Pręgowski, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_003.

were many times relocated, from one *kacet* to another. I will now focus on those inmates who spent almost the whole of the war in one camp, to be finally detained in Mauthausen-Gusen, where they spent the last months of the war. This change appears to be a separate experience. For many prisoners, it signifies a passage to another world, although the two resembled each other so much externally. This is what the man who was brought to Gusen in January 1945, after more than four years in Auschwitz, says of this moment:

I find it hard to compare. These things were incomparable. First, I was the whole time in Auschwitz, and so know the whole history of Auschwitz. The hardest hell to have been through was in the year '40, '41, '42. Then, it became a little relaxed. ... Gusen II made a dire impression on me. When you come to a new camp, then you have to start everything from the beginning. I had already had a certain position in the camp, in Auschwitz. I had, given the camp conditions, a good job. ... It was under a roof, most importantly... I had no lice. You were not supposed to get lice, for we were in contact with the SS-men. ... We had a separate bathtub ..., bathing was obligatory. We knew where to steal the food from. ... And there was no other option. Simply, none. Just eating from the cauldron. And that's it. And the food from the cauldron was very, very meagre. Because a whole series of concentration camps, on evacuation, were dumped there, after all.¹²³

In many of the senior prisoners' stories, the privileged position is connected not only with the assistance they extended to others: also characteristic to it was participation in the camp's 'second life' and the offering of various forms of resistance, as these actions are called by their participants. This is obviously not about armed resistance, but about creating inside the camp certain social spaces that imitate the ordinary activities of free people: participation in the forms of entertainment available at camp; attending the 'walking university' lectures; singing with a choir; sporting activities; writing poetry; membership of an organised religious group; participation in poetry contests, and the suchlike. With these varied activities, emphasising their ancillary function with respect to the young, or junior, confused *Zugangs*, is important. As we hear, this was another method for the 'seniors' to protect the 'juniors' against the *Lagerhell*.

Sometimes, this particular dimension of the experience of the eldest *Häftlings*, their 'second life' in the *Lager* – an aspect that tends to be neglected, if not depreciated and satirised by many an 'ordinary' former prisoner – assumes the level of a crucial dimension in these autobiographical narratives. It constitutes the primary sense-making filter through which the entirety of one's time at the *Lager* tends to be interpreted.¹²⁴

123 From the account of Edward Pyś, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_092 (recorded by Michał Zarzycki).

124 Three (of the four) books written by Stanisław Dobosiewicz, prisoner no. 166, on the Gusen camp are all about this particular dimension of the *Lager* experience.

Well, it was then that our Kommando was dismantling that shrine and, well, everything that was there beside it, the planks, went into storage, while we took off the statue of Our Lady and the cross. So, when the camp's Commandant came over one time, asking, '*Wo ist Madonna?*', where are those things?, // to our *Kapo*, // and the *Kapo* says, 'The Madonna is here.' But he's asking that [sic] a cross was there too. '*Wo ist [das] Kreuz?*'. So he says, 'I don't know.' He asks, '*Wo ist [das] Kreuz?*'. I'm saying, 'Well, I don't know, we've only taken this.' They knocked off, destroyed everything, then [it was] made of timber, I think, then, it's broken. And, the *Kapo* says, 'Indeed, that was of timber, that was broken', etc. And so, let's say, that one didn't say anything; they took the Madonna away. And we [kept] that cross [hidden]. But once you had it hidden, then you'd never take it off, till the very end, never remove it, and indeed, we returned and brought [it with us] to Poland, as a beautiful keepsake, as a beautiful gift. Which means that it attests that you lived for your beliefs: that you'd survive, that you have to bring these documents [referring to a hidden cross and rosary made of bread, as elsewhere mentioned by this Interviewee – PF's note], for them to testify to this spiritual force of man, that in spite of taking the risk, he believed in something, had faith, of some sort, that he'll have been through it. That was what you needed very much in those moments: to avoid getting depressed....

A secret organisation was operating already at that time, which aimed at lifting the spirits, providing mutual aid, taking care of the juveniles. // And at this point, a great bow, huge bow to the professors, the men of science, who, suffered like any inmate – fright, fear, hunger, poverty, indigence – yet they were still strong enough to take care of the younger ones, complement the education of the young in there. This consisted of so-called 'threes', that is, just two participants and the professor who came over, doing it during time off work, when this was assigned for relaxation, such as in the day, or evening. Then, you'd walk between the barracks, or across the roll-call ground, well, you were supposedly talking, because more than three at a time were not supposed to walk together. The professor was in the middle, and we, at the sides, the two participants, and that's what you called the 'walking university'. We were walking, and those were lectures from various areas of science. Superb lecturers, and never 'in plain clothes', never could you learn so much, or absorb as much knowledge, as you did then. Whether it was that particular thirty minutes, or some other – this is hard to say. You lived in that moment, thinking about the lecture the whole day, it strengthened your spirits, and they said that there shall be a Poland, although we are in camps, prisons, you the young people need to be prepared, for Poland will be in need of you. Meaning, they didn't break down, or crumble, that it's all finished tomorrow, or the next day, although it's all the same to everyone, you never know what's going to be there in an hour or two. And we should make a huge bow to those men of science, who, instead of taking a rest, ravenous and emaciated as they were, rescued those younger ones. Well, they also took care of those younger ones, for there's the hard work in the stone pits. And on the other side, they were also the main engine behind that cultural and educational effort. So, secretly from the authorities, various soirees, evening gatherings were organised; that means, what did it consist of? You'd make an appointment for this or that block, a covey of the insiders would gather, one would

stand sentry, to watch for the Gestapo man coming, and various concerts, or whatever else, were held there. Polish ones for the time being, and later, of various other nationalities. You made friends with many other nationalities, colleagues from the various nationalities.¹²⁵

Among these 'most senior' voices, we can also hear others which do not recall anything like this, cannot find any such idealising consolation, nor even begin to look for it. For them, the camp remains a cold, cruel, ruthless world till the very end. No notion of helping the others is raised whatsoever; on the contrary, the distance between the 'old' and the 'young' is emphasised. This distance forms an abyss that separates the different, mutually incompatible experiences. Given such a perspective, the two groups are both within the same camp merely in physical terms:

It was the year '42, the block guard reported that the count for the block was three hundred. He says, 'You'll report two hundred tomorrow.' Meaning, he would have one hundred inmates killed during the afternoon and the night, the block guard. Well, he had his *Kapos* at his disposal too. He walked around, when we were already in our beds, taking down the numbers. He didn't record any older prisoner, I mean, by seniority, rather than age. They were afraid then of the older inmates. Just all the novices. The novices, they went without anything. I don't know why. No one moved.

There is more than impotence to this: there is also a reproach, a grudge held against the 'novices', as they were so passive, would not offer any resistance, and just let the butchers kill them. The reproach does not extend to members of the group the narrator belongs to: those older in seniority. They could simply stay in bed, as the executioners were afraid of them. The memory and evocation in our conversation of that particular scene, interpreted in such a 'dispassionate' manner, with no room for compassion or pity, corresponds with the other generalisations offered by this narrator:

Believe me, I should emphasise it now that I never saw, during the entire five years of my stay in the camp, an SS-man beating, kicking a prisoner; an SS-man, uniform-wearing functionary. Only the inmates were murdering. And what some others write about a coexistence like that, about a camaraderie – that's lies. Indeed, there were cases of comradeship, but [between] two, or three men who knew each other from the same area, but generally, man was really like a wolf to another man.¹²⁶

This caustic judgement has not prevented this Interviewee from evoking the situations where older inmates extended their assistance to younger ones, gave them

125 From the account of Waclaw Milke, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_019.

126 From the account of Tadeusz Różycki, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_042 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner). This is exactly what Primo Levi refers to as the 'grey zone'; his image is more complex, though.

more food, organised 'second life' institutions to detach those juniors, be it for a while, from the overwhelming first one.

As we can thus see, a stay of several long years at a *kacet* can lead to various generalisations, and completely differing interpretations. There is a shared tendency to put them into words; a conviction or, perhaps, a sense that a lengthy inmate seniority makes the survivor an expert, a connoisseur of the *Lager* issues. It gives him a special right to express interpretations whose purpose is not limited to adding sense or meaning to one's own specific experiences: they are constructed as commentaries on the camp experience in general; the camp experience as an abstract.

Many of the oldest inmates tell us not only about aiding the weaker and the younger ones in the camp, but also about a sense of responsibility they had for the others after liberation as well. Many of them (although not only the eldest participated) helped organise a transit camp for the Poles waiting to be transported back home, and acted as wardens of such transports. The camp veterans who returned before the others sometimes assumed a messenger mission, notifying families about the situation of those who still remained in Austria and were to return later.

I bade farewell to the camp, I bade farewell to the colleagues who remained there; we encouraged them to write letters to their home country. I took 237 letters from the inmates in my knapsack, on various types of paper, with the addresses, and which I was supposed to drop off at the first post office [I would come across] after my arrival in the homeland. I was to post them, and they were to reach their homes [= destination]. The letters reached the country indeed....

We were returning home, expecting great things there; we encountered terrible disillusionment. Once the train arrived in Dziedzice, the Czechowice-Dziedzice station, at the frontier, [we went directly] from the camp, Soviet soldiers greeted us. They made us stand in a file and searched our luggage. And whatever they liked, they took. When I was being searched, I talked to the soldier in Russian. Then, our prisoners asked of me that I absolutely must request to talk to their officer and complain that we were being robbed. I did that. I explained that these people are on their way back home, where they were from, who they are, what a gross crime this was, that we were being robbed. The soldier, the officer, called those soldiers, said that they would be punished, they might even be executed by firing squad for that, and ordered that everything be given back. But that was a terrible hardship for us....

On 15th June [1945] I travelled to Poznań, to see what was going to happen with my potential job, in the future. To the curator's office of Poznań, which was in operation already. Taking the opportunity, I paid a visit to the *Głos Wielkopolski* [a local periodical] editorial offices, and there I placed a brief notice saying that I had returned from the camp of Mauthausen-Gusen, that anyone interested in what might have happened to members of their families [who had been] sentenced to Gusen are encouraged to request me, at my Słupca address, // to request information, since I was well versed in the camp situation, with several years' stay at the camp behind me. And soon after I received more than fifty letters, from various regions. Also, years

afterwards [I was receiving] various greetings of thanks from those whom I had first announced good tidings... I kept these letters, as an interesting memento.¹²⁷

Even so, there were some far more dramatic recollections of the messenger mission assumed by the senior and well-versed former prisoners. Today, so many years after, these reminiscences have not conveniently settled in the memory, and now appear in the narrative far from polished. Once evoked, they cause much pain:

And, well, we reached Turek, // having already gone past the lanes, that's what they're called: the lanes, and we're driving into the narrow-gauge railway station in Turek. ... We can all see that almost the whole of Turek has gathered at that railway station, 'cause Jasiu Herman phoned Turek before. They apparently let everybody know there in Turek, for it is not a big town, after all, and almost the whole of Turek was now gathered. And they're all waiting for their fathers, grandfathers, sons, who had been deported. They're waiting. Once we drove into the narrow-gauge railway station, we hear a fire brigade band playing, some joyous anthem is what they're playing. Trumpets, drums, all to greet us. We all disembarked, we were all moved to tears, even the tough guys from the camp. We were moved to tears as we had returned to Turek. And, at this point, some of them ran up asking, "Where's this one, where's that one?" And we had agreed in advance that we'd be telling them they're going to be back later, as for now it's only us returning. And they'll come back later. Perhaps they've stayed for a while in Austria, some even applied for conscription in the army, but return they sure will. We knew very well that there was nobody else to return.¹²⁸

Acquaintance with the *Lager* universe – or, to be more specific, the sense of such an acquaintance – is characteristic not only for individual senior prisoners but is, moreover, a feature ascribed to those in the oldest group – by themselves as well as by the whole milieu of the former Mauthausen-system of concentration camp inmates. Although so scarce in number, elderly and ailing, often not fit enough to be actively involved, not participating in meetings, commemorative celebrations, trips to Mauthausen, etc. – they are lastingly memorialised by the younger inmates. The latter evoke the former as their recognised authorities. It often happened that some of these younger inmates referred us to their older colleagues, seeing them as experts in *Lager*-related matters. And the oldest usually knew one another quite well, remembering each other from the camp as well as from various post-war meetings. Some of them cultivated collegial, or even friendly, relationships. The experience of the long years spent at the camp – almost from the very beginning (construction of the barracks) until the very end (liberation) has been the basis for the consolidation and reuniting of this milieu. The bond between the old *Häftlings*

127 From the account of Stanisław Dobosiewicz, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_014.

128 From the account of Albert Juszkiewicz, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_024 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner).

proved, in some cases, resistant to the differences in their philosophies of life, religious or political views and attitudes. This bond also played an important role in creating an objectivised story, a historical narrative, of the Gusen camp. The author of a few basic studies on this camp says of his methodology:

To this matter, // to camp matters, I was attracted by my camp mates. I kept in contact with my friends from the camp, now scattered across the country. ... I began working on the history of the camp from 1972 onwards.

I think that what I have recounted is a very brief summary of what is in those books. The book is not my memoirs; it is a third-person [singular] report on the camp. It is, besides, mainly a story of what I have gone through myself or observed inside the camp, but this as confronted, generally, with what various colleagues can remember in this respect. I have handled correspondence with fifty-two acquaintances from the camp; with such outstanding inmates, on whose accounts I could depend. Much of that [= material] has been accumulated.¹²⁹

It is perhaps worth adding that the first and, possibly, still the most important monograph on the Mauthausen camp, as the headquarters of the system, was authored by its long-term inmate Hans Maršálek, an Austrian.¹³⁰

I should like to discuss the 'low-number' inmates: the survivors who were released from the camp following imprisonment of a few or so months. Although rare, such incidents did take place. A few Interviewees we have talked to did indeed experience release from a *kacet*, rather than the liberation. Their autobiographical reports on the beginnings of the camp experience, arrest, transport to the *Lager*, construction of the camp infrastructure and the first months of functioning inside the space, fit well with a typical 'old *Häftling*' narrative. But what then follows is a sudden separation of their stories and the group memory. The camp trajectories of those who were released early are incomplete; their voice appears considerably softened, amidst the voices of the other survivors. Their stories do not quite fit as building material for the collective memory of the former inmates.

Yet, these voices are softened to a varying degree, depending on the reason for their release and the interpretation they give, which would enable this experience to be integrated with the rest of the camp autobiography. This is why those who were released on the arbitrary decision of the Germans – just like the one which put them into a KZ – find it much easier to tell their stories.

On certain occasions during a prisoner's stay in a camp, somewhere far away, some legal action was being pursued with respect to their case, without them knowing, and was finally concluded with the decision to set them free. This decision would be delivered, according to the law – unmindful of the arbitrariness and absurdity of keeping all the others detained at the camp:

129 From the account of Stanisław Dobosiewicz, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_014.

130 H. Maršálek, *Die Geschichte des Konzentrationslagers Mauthausen*, Wien – Linz, 1995.

One evening, we were called to the hairdresser, who shaved us. We were wondering what's the shaving for, and they said that we're going to be released tomorrow morning. As I learned, I had been sentenced in Pszczyna to six months, while seven months had passed, and for a month the local German police were looking, with all those merchants, with the Germans, for evidence that I had persecuted Germans. Only when I got out... then I discovered that they had been coming forward asking for an opinion, but no one would say anything bad about me, and I was therefore released after the seven months.¹³¹

In some cases, no strong rationalisations of this kind appear, which could be used as a backup when it comes to interpreting the atypical experience of release from the camp. The situation can, in such cases, be familiarised, discharged, and given a biographical meaning, precisely by emphasising its arbitrariness – as one of my Interviewees, an 'old Auschwitzer', number 44, has done. The narrator is, moreover, aided in this by the date of 1 April, excellent for the purposes of such an interpretation:

I was released on April Fool's Day, // I was released on the 1st of April. And I'm standing at the roll-call, and that's that Bumbo, // as I was on my way back to the camp, the doorkeeper, that small midget, says, 'You, *verundvierzig* [number forty-four], have been released.' And I say to him, at first glance, "No stupid joking around!" Well, in any case, I growled out something to him, impolitely, in reply; I fell in, and heard them read the names. They released forty-eight of us then. They're reading my name? They're not, so I run up there, to hear. Palitsch reads out that by means of order of the Commander of the camp... // I wasn't sure whether I didn't mishear the German, or [heard it] well, // but I can see, everybody beside me is joyful, as we would be released, but only in three weeks' time. We have now to be through a three-week quarantine, to pull through.

The absurdity and incomprehension of the whole situation are obvious when recalled once again:

But can you figure it out that I, until then, // as I've already told you, // I don't know how on earth, what influenced it so that I was released, carefully and exactly. Once I got to know about it, I thought that my parents might have ransomed me. But I returned home: utter poverty, you had nothing to eat at all. The father's got no work, the mother's got no work, there are three brothers at home, one of them, moreover, with a wife and a little child. I returned at Easter, then you had nothing to feed yourself with, even on the holiday. My mother got some *pirogi* [dumplings].

131 From the account of Paweł Kokot, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_078 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner).

The release experience is the toughest to tackle, though, for those who cannot explain it in terms of the absurdity or, otherwise, the rationality of decisions made by Nazi functionaries. For those, that is, who had a sense that the decision was somehow dependent on them; that they helped produce it, that they could have contributed to their early release. Although the developments were usually dependent not on them but on their families, their fathers and mothers, it is they who grapple with the burden of guilt. Not because they are guilty, or because their parents are to blame as they got them out of the *kacet*: the reason is, apparently, that the collective memory of the experience of confinement in the concentration camp offers no room for their narrative. This makes their own voice barely audible – and, probably, unknown to many; and thus, in turn, it is seemingly astonishing, completely separate.

Among my interviews with Mauthausen survivors is a conversation with a prisoner who was released as a result of the endeavours taken by his mother. In order to save her son, this woman decided to sign the *Volksliste*. It took us many long hours before my Interviewee shared this piece of his experience with me. Before he opened up, I had been trying hard to put the pieces together and comprehend his fragmented *Lager* story: instead of having some characteristic ending, a powerful culminating point, it was becoming completely blurred. Our meeting was important for my Interviewee. It was perhaps one of the few at which he decided to tell his story to an ‘alien’. He had been afraid to do this to his colleagues from the former inmate milieu; in spite of a strong need to unburden himself, he remained on the sidelines. He made it at the last moment, so to put it: he died three months or so after we had met and talked. Let us pause for a while at a fragment of his laborious, softened story of his experience of release:

I... // You were allowed to write a letter home once in a month. The letter would be censored, but I managed to smuggle a message to my family that I resembled uncle Andrzejewski while... // I knew that uncle Andrzejewski had died before the war, which means, I let them know that I was having a very rough time of it, well, and... // Then, as I learned afterwards, my family, especially my sister, who was right after me in the sequence – Henryka – contrived that ‘we should get him out of there, in whatever way’. My mum had been displaced from the housing estate and lived in Chojny, and there Mrs Larkowska, the owner of the house, cottage [*coughs*], said, had she pulled her son out of a concentration camp, // and she said how she did this. She said to my mother that my mother ought to sign the *Volksliste* and, afterward, // make a demand. To demand of the Gestapo, request the Gestapo that I also be released, set free. Well, and, since my mum wasn’t initially willing... but, at my sister’s instigation, she consented. She consented... // But, she had great difficulties, as she didn’t speak German. My mum had no command of the German language. She found it very difficult to communicate. She’d always go with the Larkowska lady as an interpreter, for that lady spoke perfect German. [*silence*]

And, well, sometime after, they called me, at the camp, to the chancellery, told me to sign some document, I didn’t even read the document, I signed it. And they told me

I would be released. But since there was, // typhoid broke out, and no-one was going to be released right then, so I still had to wait three months till the *szpera* [from the German *Sperre* = ban] would be abolished, which means, the ban on leaving the camp would be abolished.

Well, and I came over, after... [*pondering*], after... one year and a half, // no, one-and-a-half years?... // After nineteen months in the camp, I arrived home. Well, I arrived home, but it turned out that I had to report to the police, // and it turned out that this, on... // My release and the signing of the *Volksliste* by my mother, // well, it wasn't quite all for the best with us, because my brother was conscripted with the German army. They took him to the army board, classed him as an 'A' and, well... // he got a notification that he's supposed to report to a German unit.¹³²

The reconnaissance and diagnoses spun so far with regards to long-term political prisoners in Nazi concentration camps have primarily referred to the accounts of survivors of Mauthausen and its subcamps – particularly, Gusen, the 'most Polish' of them all. But, if we set aside the aspects related to the specificity of this concrete KZ, the above remarks can also be made about the survivors of other camps, who spent several years in them. In the Polish memory landscape, a special position is assigned to the most senior Auschwitz prisoners, in particular, those who were brought to the camp with the first transport, the so-called Tarnów transport, of 13th June 1940. Few of them are still alive today, but those who are continuously gather at the annual anniversary celebrations held at the site of the former camp. It is significant that the celebrations are held in the middle of June: rather than the date of liberation, the date on which they were put into the *Lager* is meant to determine their identity as (former) inmates. Those first Auschwitz inmates – the camp pariahs of 1940, who later on, in 1943 and 1944, assumed a privileged, at times prominent, position – today form a group that keeps possibly the strongest guard on the Polish memory of the camp.¹³³ This memory sometimes competes with the Jewish memory of the Holocaust, with a strongly marked emphasis on the difference between Auschwitz and Birkenau – and they demand that others bear this difference in mind as well. Here is a passage taken from the account of a former Auschwitz inmate in the first transport, who for many years served there as a barber to the crew, including Commandant Höss himself:

132 From the account of Zdzisław Nowakowski, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_076.

133 This memory is institutionally expressed by, among others, the Christian Association of Auschwitz Victims. One of its recent projects is the videotaping of more than forty interviews with former inmates of the camp, primarily, the eldest Polish prisoners. For a presentation of this effort, including fragments of the interviews, see the webpage: www.auschwitzmemento.pl.

I have to add one more thing. // I should've said this at the beginning. There is an erroneous concept of Auschwitz in the world, generally: 'Auschwitz is the Holocaust only, nothing else'. Of course, my colleagues and I were the first to go into Oświęcim [i.e. Auschwitz]. Poles only were in Auschwitz till 1942. The first Czechs arrived on 1st June 1941. There arrived the first group of Czech political prisoners, but otherwise there were just Poles. A wrong idea. Auschwitz was established in order to destroy the Polish nation: the intelligentsia, the youth. Absolutely. I say it everywhere and always. The following stage was the Holocaust, but that came later. Initially, Oświęcim was set up with a view to liquidating the Polish nation.

Speaking up repeatedly for the presence of a narrative of the Polish experience of Auschwitz does not necessarily imply a blindness to the Holocaust experience. It is, rather, a repeated cry that the camp route followed by the group of inmates with which this narrator identifies should have an established and powerful place in the collective memory. Elsewhere this Interviewee talks about being an eyewitness to the extermination of Jews:

That was a slaughter that is unutterable in this world. Unimaginable. A mother is walking with a child, keeping it beside her – they are all going to meet their deaths, for nothing, for the fact that they are humans. For they were born Jewish. I might not like Jews, but those are terrible things, beyond comprehension. We, the people who saw all that and who were there, we cannot believe this ourselves. This is unbelievable. This is impossible to describe. Those were horrible things.¹³⁴

But let us now resume the thread of differences more subtle than the one between the Polish and the Jewish experiences of Auschwitz. The differences within the Polish experience of *kaceta*, and the autobiographical narratives of Mauthausen survivors – the area I feel most familiar with – will be explored further.

3.2 Concentration camp as punishment and wartime 'adventure'

A different type of *Lager/kaceta* narrative has been developed in the stories of those survivors who were put into the camp after having lived several months under the Nazi Occupation, during which time they had experiences other than those in the camp. They were arrested in the years 1941, 1942 and 1943 (less often in 1940 and 1944) with the charge of conspiratorial activity (from armed struggle through to transporting Polish Underground printed matter hidden in a bicycle frame) as well as for grosser offences committed while kept as forced labourers or escaping from the forced labour site. Some were also incarcerated in place of a member of their

134 From the account of Józef Paczyński, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_203.

family who had been found guilty of an offence.¹³⁵ Extremely varied pre-camp and post-camp experiences are included in this category, which makes it difficult to see these cases as a relatively homogeneous group of survivors. However, attentive listening to these voices enables us to recognise the similarities – not so much in the camp experiences as incidents of 'there and then' but, rather, in the ways in which they are evoked within the perspective of an autobiographical narrative.

The camp trajectories of these individuals are part of their wartime trajectories, coming as their consequence and crowning, if not their culmination. The experience of the *Lager* does not, thus, fill these autobiographical narratives to the degree it does the narratives of their older (senior) camp colleagues. And if it does, it does not appear as limited to the one camp of Mauthausen or Gusen but extends to the several camps they were consecutively kept in.

Mauthausen, Gusen, or any other subcamp of the Mauthausen system was the place where they faced the liberation. The experience of being a freed prisoner/survivor of Mauthausen is an important landmark for our Interviewees in their self-definition as former inmates of this particular camp. This moment is, moreover, decisive for their affiliation with the circle of former Mauthausen inmates and their participation in the commemoration rituals practiced by this group.

For those survivors who, in the course of their prison career, went through a number of KZs – many such being represented in this group – the stay at Mauthausen-Gusen was the last stage of their multistage camp route. In some cases, there are so many stages that the narrator tends to lose their sequence, and misplaces the events ("I am a bit confused about whether it's Vienna or Gusen"¹³⁶) – which is especially true for those least proficient in the deliberate and systematic evocation and narrative processing of such stages. For those more accustomed to making a narrative effort, the narration of each of the consecutive camps is constructed as an autonomous narrative form (though intertwined with the other ones), a certain self-contained whole.

For the narratives of this particular group of survivors, such autonomous status is often present in those stories describing what preceded their stay at the camp. These stories are often as developed as those covering the *Lager* events. Everyday life in the pre-war or Occupation periods is rarely the subject matter, as these

135 Among the instances of collective/family responsibility applied by the Nazis, the detailed, dense story of the arrest, imprisonment, and sending to the concentration camps of members of the Leszczyński family of Łódź deserves particular attention: two brothers, a sister and the mother, instead of the eldest brother who was active with the anti-Nazi conspiracy movement (he had managed to escape while being arrested). The two brothers were put in Mauthausen. Their stories have been taped as part of the Polish contribution to the MSDP project. See the account of Stanisław Leszczyński, ref. no. MSDP_031, and of his brother Henryk Leszczyński, ref. no. MSDP_164.

136 From the account of Józef Nowak, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_085.

registers of daily life usually become blurred in the narration of the individual's memory, exceeding their narrative potential; instead, pronounced wartime experiences enter the memory, ones that prove crucial for their personal identities. These typically include conspiratorial efforts or forced labour (including the completely diverse experiences of working 'under the *Bauer*' or being an industrial worker); arrest, imprisonment – in some cases, in several Gestapo-run gaols or remand centres; transports from one detention/imprisonment place to another; and, lastly, being put in a concentration camp.

Even more multilevel and complicated are the autobiographical stories (and biographies, in a colloquial meaning) of our Interviewees who, after the war, were persecuted by the communist authorities for their participation in the 'inappropriate' conspiracy. In these narratives, the more individualised trajectory of the repression suffered after the war overlaps with the wartime trajectory. This obviously informs the interpretation of their *Lager*-time experiences, the meaning given to their own (and not only their own) survival and, later on, impacts on their attitude towards the veteran and camp prisoner organisations that were active in the People's Republic of Poland (specifically, the ZBOWiD).

Some members of this particular group of Interviewees – constructing their autobiographical narratives from a few or a dozen or so autonomous stories concerning various wartime and post-war experiences – interpret them as a sequence of events, adventures, or episodes that occurred in their lives. And although each of them is instrumental in telling a separate story, they often become united under a common interpretation that enables us to construct a single coherent autobiography from them. The integrating factor, the one that gives an autobiographical sense to the various experiences and ordeals, is, in most cases, Divine Providence, a miracle, a lucky accident, and the suchlike, which have enabled these narrators to go through and outlive all that, and to survive. But, there are also some pretty measurable, concrete rationalisations. Both meanings appear mutually complementary, rather than exclusive. Diverse metaphysics and rationalisations function within one story.

If practised earlier on, built from with a distance, and with gusto too, such autobiographical narratives sometimes become animated, gripping adventure stories, peculiar eposes. The other Interviewees obviously construct similar stories too: not only those who had been arrested and imprisoned 'as a punishment' but generally, those telling the personal stories of their lives. It seems, however, that those individuals who had gone through so many diverse wartime and post-war experiences tend to build such autobiographical epics more often than the others.

Let us now take a somewhat closer look at the few characteristic moments in the diverse narratives of the survivor group in question.

One of our Interviewees, arrested in July 1943 for his involvement in the conspiracy, gaoled at the Gestapo headquarters in Kielce and, subsequently, in the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Mauthausen and Gusen, states the following at the beginning of his account:

By 1940, my parents had already been members of the conspiracy, and I was therefore also made part of it. Earpieces and gloves for [Major] 'Hubal' troops were sewn at our home, and I transported them to the nuns, the Dominican nuns. There, I was hosted by a man who carried them to the vicinity of Końskie. I brought three greatcoats, and fifty complete earpieces and pairs of gloves.¹³⁷

This passage directly follows the Interviewee's initial self-introduction; in fact, it forms part of it, as the conspiratorial lineage is an important aspect of his self-definition. This becomes even more visible as we learn, further on, that the narrator in fact became involved in conspiratorial activities at a much later point. He was only thirteen in 1940. A similar thing happens in another story, with the difference that, here, the narrator's actual engagement starts at the beginning of the war. The third and the following sentences of this account, right after he gives his name and date of birth, read as follows:

As the war began, as the Germans entered Włocławek, we gathered, a few people, including my sister, two years older than me, and we set up, // actually, it was my sister who set it up, the Kuyavian Political-Literary Union. We issued newsheets. Obviously, these newsheets were issued [i.e. produced] with a duplicator, because that was the only way to do it. There were items of news from radio recordings, from radio monitoring. There were items of literary news, something to raise the spirit. Well, and they were getting spread about. It came to the point that everyone was waiting for that newsheet. There was a whole host of distributors. Everybody was barging into that Union. And, well, that lasted for the whole of the year '40, until the arrest, // till the year '41.¹³⁸

A definite majority of the Interviewees, former prisoners who were arrested once 'as a punishment', confine themselves to the vague statement that they were active in the conspiracy, delivering newspapers or leaflets, sharing information, etc. In most cases, just a general remark is made that the structures they operated within or worked for were the Grey Ranks (Szare Szeregi), Home Army (Armia Krajowa), National Armed Forces (Narodowe Siły Zbrojne), etc. They often have no relevant knowledge or prove unable to locate their own activity within a broader historical context. But, even though their role was very modest and is now referred to at a distance, in a detailed yet peculiarly non-historical manner, this particular biographic thread is always there – even if expressed in an impersonal fashion:

So, in Poddębice, it was listened to and that was transmitted; the news was, of course, also... from the ZWZ [i.e. Union of Armed Struggle]. We received the instructions, for

137 From the account of Dyonizy Lechowicz, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MS DP_034 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

138 From the account of Benedykt Lech, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MS DP_056 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner).

the ZWZ was at that time, out of which the AK [i.e. Home Army] was later formed. But first, there were various organisations, later it was consolidated into the ZWZ; finally, the AK emerged...

But sir, well, I had nothing to do with arms. Just the gathering and transmission of the news between the region's headquarters and the district headquarters. So, what was going on, what transports were going, how they carried the Jews away, to Łódź. Well, then, then on the following day they had it signalled to the district headquarters. So, these matters were shared very quickly.¹³⁹

In some of the stories, this involvement in the conspiracy is merely one of the wartime 'adventures' – a less important one than the other, more absorbing and moving adventures. They are moving for the Interviewee and the listener, and, probably, for the reader of the transcript:

And together with my brother, we decided to escape from the Germans, because the Germans were drawing close, as we had learned, to Łódź, // or maybe they had those first bridgeheads of theirs just there in Łódź. And we went by bike eastwards. Many various adventures on the way, but these are commonly known: the bombings we survived, the flights, contact with the troops running away. Lastly, crossing the Vistula, you know, where we could have had a bad end right there, as the bridge was collapsing. But finally, we reached as far as Łuck [today, Lutsk in Ukraine], and there we worked in a hospital, my brother was a second-year medical student at the time, he'd already have some contact with that medicine, so he assisted with the dressing, and I was there, a sort of, 'pass-me-the-brick' [i.e. helper/labourer], // I served those who were injured a little, washed things sometimes, etc.

And there we were, // there were a good number of Polish soldiers, in that hospital. And there were even such, // two [of them] were from Westerplatte, I can remember. They were killed there, anyway. There was no way to rescue them, but there was one, such, a picture that startled me. That is, there were two physician captains, wearing Polish uniforms. And, // the Soviets had already come there. And, // I can't remember whether they were well-oiled or not, but, in any case, they were walking and they, those ones, the Soviet soldiers, shot them in the back, just like that. I saw those two doctors being killed, when they simply walked home, in the evening, after work, you know, and then we decided to go further on by bike. We took the bikes with us, and we went on by bike. And we went to Lvov. My brother studied in Lvov, and there, there was a friendly apartment, some Ukrainian woman's place, in any case. Well, it was very hard, the Russians were there already, everything was changing, there... it would be too long a story to tell, but we had there... // We had to queue for bread there, it was hard.¹⁴⁰

139 From the account of Eugeniusz Śliwiński, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_131.

140 From the account of Stanisław Leszczyński, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_031.

In many an autobiographical account, it is the conspiracy-related fragment of the story that triggers the liveliest emotions in the narrator, proving far more important than the other adventures; proving crucial. The phrase '(confirmation by) oath/swearing in' is strongly emphasised, and the story of the conspiratorial experience refers to the official military language and soldier's jargon. Pre-war military men and those who partook in the Defence War of 1939 in particular excel at it. The distinguishing features in these narratives are the noms-de-guerre of the commanders, troop names, dates, etc., evoked as the story unfolds.

I was sworn in, in February 1940, by Mr Sowa [then using the name Stefan Lelek (Transl. note)], a Senator of the Polish Republic, who very shortly after the oath was taken was detained, together with his daughter, by the Gestapo of Lublin, and executed. I continued to organise the Resistance in the Kraśnik county [*powiat*] area, and from there I was transferred from the ZWZ, with which I had sworn my oath, to the Home Army, in February 1941. As I knew that area very well and had it worked out, I was entrusted with the organisation of Kraśnik District [*Obwód Kraśnik*] and Janów-Lubelski, the organisation department, with the title of Officer for Special Missions. I've got a document confirming this, in case you'd be willing to read it. The document says, "Captain Rymsza, nom-de-guerre 'Rębacz', Deputy District Commander." My district commander, // I don't know his exact name, for he had several IDs, for the names: Kaczyński, Kaczkowski, Kaczorowski, with the nom-de-guerre 'Zygmunt'.¹⁴¹

In some cases, the moment of the oath swearing appears even more distinct:

In the Polish Armed Organisation [*Polska Organizacja Zbrojna*], I had [the nom-de-guerre of] 'Brzóska', // and when I was referred to the Home Army, I was then 'Feliks'. I was confirmed by oath with the Polish Armed Organisation; with the AK, I took no oath. I can remember the opening: 'Appreciating the responsibility for the armed actions taken by the Polish Nation, I henceforth join the Polish Armed Organisation. I solemnly swear ...', and the whole sequence of those various solemn assertions: 'that I shall ...'¹⁴²

The moment of apprehension/detention/arrest proves to be a crucial moment in the story, whether the Interviewee finds his (or her) involvement in the conspiracy to be his (or her) key experience before the *Lager* or evokes this aspect in the background of many other wartime adventures, often much more intriguing ones. This is a distinct turning point in the autobiography: the moment they go from the state of freedom (albeit freedom under the Occupation) to the state of slavery.

141 From the account of Zbigniew Dębiński, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_075 (recorded by Dorota Pazio).

142 From the account of Kazimierz Pieńkos, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_020 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb).

The transition is all the more severe as arrest as a punishment frequently implies cruel treatment, lashings, imprisonment (in several prisons, in many cases), and Gestapo interrogations. These repressive measures, not infrequently torture, are so severe also because they are inflicted on an individual basis, affecting the person detained and interrogated for their individual faults – not for being an anonymous part of a group. This experience is entirely different from being a victim of mass detentions as part of the action aimed against the intelligentsia of spring 1940, or mass deportations to the camps during the Warsaw Uprising (August to October 1944). It marks a radical entrance in one's individual trajectory – even when the arrest embraces a larger group of conspirators:

The Germans got to know something was going on there, arrested the five of us, had two shot right after they were interrogated, and three of us deported to... // to Zawodzie, there, to the prison, and in that prison I stayed for some two weeks, it was the year '43, August; // in late August/early September. I can't remember the exact date. ... So, I... // was beaten dreadfully, so beaten was I, I've got a description of the illness here, // after the war, when I returned, I was cured; I had my bottom so battered that I had blood and water flowing out of it for the whole two years in the camp...

As they interrogated me, // for I was interrogated, the last one, was beaten up, // Gerwaz was beaten up so badly that they carried him away, and me too, but when they interrogated me, then, it was, // first, here, at the Gestapo, right? 'What organisation are you a member of?' I say, 'I don't know any organisation.' 'But what newssheets do you read?', the German says, in Polish. I say, '*Kurier Częstochowski*', for there was one like that under the Germans. 'It's not about those ones, it's about your ones.' 'I don't know any at all, I've got nothing.' 'OK then, and who is your commander?' I say, 'The commander, aha! It's Marchewka.' Says he, 'Gerwaz, he is your commander.' And it was indeed him. I say, 'He is a commander with the fire brigade.' 'Not like that, is he in that gang', says he, 'is he the commander?' I say that I don't know of any gang. And then he opens the cabinet, and, various weapons, various stuff, the partisans, as they had various such remade ones. 'Well, which one was yours, show me.' I say that I haven't been in the army at all, I'm not familiar with firearms. And then, they started beating me so; he says, 'You'll own up!' Then I lost consciousness; so, they carried me out, to a Gestapo cellar, I was to see that cellar again after the war as well, there was this tin-covered door, and we had nothing to eat or drink for two days, nothing.¹⁴³

The Interviewee part of whose account has just been quoted was arrested for his involvement in the conspiracy, which, as was frequently the case, became known as a result of a 'giveaway' from somebody who had been detained and 'crushed' in a similar investigation procedure.

143 From the account of Stanisław Wochal, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_062.

It also happened, however, that arrest came as a surprise, with no specific reason behind it whatsoever – resulting from a coincidence, or from resumed repression for some previous 'faults', such as participation in the September 1939 campaign:

The Ukrainian police were ferreting out, // catching such persons, better versed, // the organisers, better drilled and trained, and liquidated them. Beside me too, around me, // there were many incidents happening, they'd make an assault in the night, surround the house, carry away those individuals, the men. And they went away, a kilometre or two, to the bushes, they shot them, and went back to the station. Based on the news // that reached me, I was oriented, one hundred per cent, that some day... the same thing would happen with me. I was wary. And, so, there were still a few such incidents, and finally they came to my place too, but I took precautions and so they didn't find me there, and they failed to grab me. But I then had to be, like, cautious, stay at home less, and... Now, the question: what to do about myself? Where to be?

But I resorted to a solution in that I had quite a number of acquaintances from my military days; various addresses, and I visited some of the soldiers, those who had survived, and usually in large cities, such as Warsaw, Radom, Kraków. You could hide easier there, in a big city, than in a village or in a small town. I used the opportunity // of that, of that guard, but eventually, how did it happen that I got to the camp? This will perhaps be the most interesting point.

And, I was on my way back home one day, // cannot remember now if it was from Krakow or from Radom, via Lublin, and in Lublin there was a change of train, and there, in the night, the German gendarmerie rushed into the railway station, and they drove everyone into one corner, and carded them. I crawled into the hands of the police, the Gestapo. And the young ones like myself, I was twenty-seven then, // were picked up, I can't remember exactly, but over twenty, twenty such youngsters, the Gestapo took us to the car, and, to... // to the prison. Well, interesting... // I was curious as to what's going to happen then. What are they going to do with me then? And, in the morning, // the gendarmerie, the Gestapo, called up each of us, based on the ID, which station [each of us] reported to. And they called up my station, and that's the Ukrainians – they were chasing me. And, as they received the reply: arrest, contain, homicidal to the Germans. [*silence*] And, from the remand prison I was carried to Lublin Castle. I think... where? What sort of a prison was it, the Castle in Lublin! I passed through a Gehenna there.¹⁴⁴

Some Interviewees evoke the arrest in terms of a casual occurrence in yet another sense: the reason behind it might have been guilt for something other than what the narrator himself/herself considers primary and actual. A story of these traumatic events told in this way helps put them into perspective – even if, in certain cases, by ridiculing those who used to inflict pain. Here is a fragment of such a reserved, somewhat cynical, interpretation of this kind of experience:

144 From the account of Józef Bednarczyk, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_069.

Stupidity. Essentially, as I'm, already now, from the perspective of the years, as I'm pondering to myself, and still when I hear them talking of the wisdom and order of those Germans, then I'm boiling with anger. That is stupidity, isn't it, so much so that it hurts. Well, then, what they made of me, to make up a prisoner so dear and warded. I was, literally, not active with the conspiracy. I admit, I was with the ZWZ, yes, but I had no activity with them. If, however, I were be asked or interrogated about the foundry [the site of sabotage actions, referred to by the Interviewee earlier in his account (PF's note)], then I'd feel miserable. But they, just figure it out for yourself, gave the accusation of a *Landesverrat*. I knew my German to the extent that I did know about the *Landesthing*, that it's a country, something of the sort. But, a *Verrat*? // Staying in that cell, in isolation, I didn't know for a few months then what *Verrat* was. Not until [I asked] the one who brought me the down: 'What is *Verrat*?' 'Ah, son-of-a-gun', says he, 'that is a traitor.' They made me a traitor of the country, so, how should you look at that, it's like I'd have betrayed the Germans. And I meditated long on where such an accusation might've come from. First, strictly political. // Stupidity. // I'm afraid of the Germans. // Second: why a traitor of the *country*? And meanwhile, they had incorporated that Coal Basin [*Zagłębie*] in the Reich [the Interviewee lived in Dąbrowa-Górnica in Silesia (PF's note)], and that would just fit them like this. After all, I was kept in an elegant cell for these four-hundred-and-twenty-plus days. I had everything in the cell.

Let us stay with this story for a while, in order to see how central to the autobiography of this particular prison is the experience of the stay in an isolation cell. This is the climax of the whole story. My Interviewee has attached a special symbolic meaning to it: not only was it his most traumatic ordeal but it was also a time for him to self-analyse and redefine himself. This moment has been decisive in a number of his subsequent life choices. None of his earlier or later experiences is evoked in a similar manner – be it his stay in Auschwitz's condemned cell, or, afterwards, in Mauthausen, or any of its two subcamps ("I have good memories of the work there"), or, marching in the Death March.

Well, and I was constantly serving time, serving time, and serving time... I ended up in a disastrous condition, such that later on, before I left for Auschwitz, as we were gathered in one cell, I couldn't crack a smile. Nothing. // Well, you'd completely, you'd completely... // You would have to go through it to know, to be familiar with the furnace. ... I haven't met such a person, // in any case, it didn't befall me to meet and talk to anyone who had served time for more than a year on his own. And so... // Later on, [there was] Auschwitz, not too long either; then on, the transport to Mauthausen. Well, there was that too.

And, when incited to tell me about his single day in the isolation cell:

Well, then, I was plucking that down. ... That was a blessing. There, what you get is completely different stories, there are psychological stories, so, those various considerations... // The Decalogue, and whatever else I could think about different things... // And, there was an incident when the Poles were not given any books to read, [un]like

what happens now in these slammers, mister: TV sets, all those things... And, I open the door: a book. Then, I caught it. The Germans were given books to read. Well, and that book was the weekly *Las* ['The Forest']. And the whole year's issue stuck into one volume. Well, so then... // And I browsed it there... // I had [it] for a week, maybe two, and then they found it and took it from me. A nice forester's house was there. And this was the time when I was considering what I should be. If I could survive at least – as is known, the prospects were vague. An episode, just like this.

This picture is complemented by a sentence uttered in the opening moments of this interview, when my Interviewee, constructing his concise biography, says this about his post-war professional activity:

Later on, I embarked on fulfilling my gaol-time daydreams – working in the forest. That was a successful outcome. I worked in forestry for a dozen or so years.¹⁴⁵

For this Interviewee, the experience of arrest and of the term served in prison before going to a *kacet* is particularly spectacular, distinct, and important. But his voice is not unique or isolated. Imprisonment and torture or interrogation reappear in numerous stories told by former camp inmates of this group, oftentimes revealed as the most traumatic occurrence in their lives. That its construction in an autobiographical narrative is of such a peculiar type possibly also stems from the fact that it is an impetuous entry into the trajectory, forming the beginning of a series of traumatic experiences. The initial one is (being) experienced the most intensely, since it occurs all of a sudden, by surprise, coming as the *first* (in a series). Nothing like this had occurred to these Interviewees ever before. The initial occurrence paves the way for the subsequent ones: once you have been through the Gestapo's gaol and tortures, you can survive the camp too. Once the first, so strong, blow was withstood, any consecutive blow, the concentration camp included, seems not as strong, and is easier to bear.

The following fragment suffices to illustrate these findings. Juxtaposed against the experience of interrogation and torture at Gestapo prisons, the departure to the camp seems to be an act of salvation; such a motif reappears in a number of narratives.

Well, the [= my] reminiscence from the stay not exactly in the gaol but at the Gestapo is painful, in the sense that I still bear traces of that memory, I spent a month in the hospital unit. In spite of my having, let me put it bluntly, owned up, 'cause I didn't know... // I was perfectly aware that they knew everything by then about me, for, had they arrested just me alone... ... But once they had already arrested Nawaliński, then I realised... ... This always in combination with one more individual, Kosowski, that they knew everything; they counted on learning something more from me, while, well, nothing from me... // Even if I wanted to tell them, I wouldn't have known.

145 From the account of Józef Nowak, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_085.

They wanted to force me to tell them that I had... // that he was then a director of an electricity establishment, then they wanted to force me to tell them that he was also a member. Well, I couldn't own it up, for I, well, didn't want to tell, indeed, so I said, well: 'I'll tell you, but this is lies.' ... They stopped tormenting me thanks to an intervention from a German doctor, who told them not to take me back to the Gestapo anymore. Once he forbade it, they stopped beating me, but I stayed in that hospital unit. I had been beaten in the prison by a gaoler, Schulze was his name, because during a walk I spoke up to... // Because we walked in circles, each one a few steps' distance from the other, well, you allegedly were not supposed... // Well, indeed, you couldn't talk, but, well, I opened my mouth, and he smashed me so that I have, here, this ear impaired Let me be frank to say that as I was on my way... [pause] ...to the camp, then I was almost happy, because... // because I had escaped the torture in the Gestapo – and, well, the death penalty. Well, after all, some of my colleagues were sentenced, in Pomiechówek, to death, and hanged. So, I was thus happy, perhaps... [sighs]¹⁴⁶

Arrest for the offence(s) committed by another member of one's family – or, simply, instead of this member – is yet another essential, and noteworthy, type of experience, one that proves particularly emphatic in some stories of this group of Interviewees. An experience of this sort pushes aside one's own conspiratorial involvement. Since the latter was not the direct reason for the arrest, it would not be of much use to give a biographical meaning to the narrator's camp and, at the earlier stage, prison trajectory. Here comes an example of such a reminiscence, whose author, although engaged in the Underground activity himself, constructs a story focused on one of the crucial moments in his life as a history of his whole family – and, as their group trajectory.

Well, and suddenly, we were at home: me, my sister Sylwia, my younger brother Henryk. // My elder brother, as I've already said, never stayed overnight at home; // my father, and my mother. And, the Gestapo enter, three men. They came over, and made a clearly cursory search, sort of. What kind of spirits [overwhelmed us], is known. And they were waiting. But, well, nobody came in, I think there was some knocking, an uncle of mine, my mother's brother, the younger one, but then he went away, they remained silent, and then, in the evening, they told us to get undressed, and, to bed! One left, two remained at the table, they were snoozing there, as I watched furtively, // and they waited for my brother. They must've had some details. My father was very vulnerable, which I had not been aware of before, that he was... // He did the printing as well, with that organisation, and we even had a tiled stove there, above that stove there was some material....

And us, to that prison van, // I can remember, it was opened, and well, we sat down, like, the four of us, that is, my mother, my sister, myself, and my brother. And

146 From the account of Zbigniew Tłuchowski, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_088.

we were waiting for what's going to happen. Well, at last, I remember that one of them said, // and my mother spoke excellent German, in fact, I spoke it a little too then, had already learned some at school, // and he said // that they couldn't find [him], and I remember that mother smiled, kind of, subtly, that they had not found him. And they carried us away, to the Gestapo. [*pause*] The four of us, which is, my mother, sister, myself, my younger brother, to the Gestapo edifice. My sister, well, very severely, so to say, paid for the manhunt for my brother being thwarted. She was severely beaten in there, till she lost her consciousness, and later, as a consequence of that beating, those injuries, and infected wounds, she had a phlegmon, which was a phlegmonous cellulitis of the face, so forever later she had, like, scars after that still, which have remained. Well, first, there was an initial inquisition, like, a mostly formal one, kind of, for later came these heavy interrogations, // but these initial ones... // And after that, they transported us to Sterlinga St. [in Łódź], I should think, to that Gestapo gaol. And we were separated with my brother, my mother and my sister were put in the women's prison, and I stayed just there, and we were in separate cells.¹⁴⁷

The narrator's younger brother Henryk, whose narrative I have also taped as part of the MSDP, recounts this arrest episode in even more detail. However, precise facts are incessantly intertwined during the course of Henryk's narrative with an extensive interpretation, a personal metaphysics of survival and salvation, a story of himself. Contrary to his older brother's account, the narrator remains the central character in this story. This provides an opportunity for us to make the obvious remark that shared participation in an (objectively speaking) event tends not only to be diversely recorded in the memories of the participants, as regards the details, but, moreover, to mean different things for them. Their individual interpretations, and the senses and/or meanings they attach to them prove to be different. Let us juxtapose the passage quoted above with a fragment of the brother's no less animated narrative: in the latter case, the occurrences are primarily (though not exclusively) used to confirm Henryk's own metaphysical presentiments, abilities stretching beyond the rational sphere:

On February the nineteenth, I went to visit some friends of mine, brought a violin for them, and then I said that the family is going through some misfortune. I had had a good intuition since childhood, this was a gift of some kind ... and this is perhaps why I deeply felt that there was some misfortune at home. One of those individuals is still alive. I was being consoled, that no, no. But I could feel it quite clearly. Therefore, when I went back home, to 3 Wspólna Street, 'Winzerweg' was its name then, I stopped in front of the house, said a short prayer, and pondered: should I go to my grandparents, or should I go to my flat, to my closest relatives? And I chose the latter option. I made up my mind, because when thinking that some disaster was happening there, that probably meant that some Gestapo officers are there, or something

147 From the account of Stanisław Leszczyński, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no MSDP_031.

of that sort, and so I want to be together with them, that I want to share in this, so as not to leave them alone. And I wasn't at all surprised when a Gestapo officer opened the door for me.¹⁴⁸

Amongst the former prisoners who were put in Nazi camps between 1941 and 1944, the second most numerous group is those arrested for various transgressions when doing forced labour, for attempted escapes, or those detained in causal roundups (i.e. raids to arrest people, usually in a closed-off street). Their experience from before the camp is different from the one of the 'conspirators'; their in-camp way is usually different, too. Common to both groups of narratives is a multiplicity of threads, and the fact that the camp experiences are situated amidst other experiences that are told and which belong to the Interviewees' wartime trajectory. The stay at a *Lager* is not a completely separate experience, seen in the context of the other fragments of these autobiographies.

I should now like to focus for a while, however, not on the similarities but on the specificity of these non-conspiratorial, non-heroic and non-patriotic stories about being placed in the KZ. Their authors are rarely given the floor. They do not come forward by themselves: they do not write and, even less so, publish their memoirs, or offer their accounts to museums; they are absent in the discourse of/on memory. Yet, they all have their individual memories. Once we had managed to somehow record them as part of our project, it was clear this record is worth eliciting. It would in fact be worth doing in a more complete manner than the perfunctory survey here allows. This has always been one of the purposes of oral history: publicising the muffled voices, those not recorded elsewhere.

Let us pass straight away to the narrative hard facts. One of my Interviewees has recounted his wartime experiences thus:

Well, I completed my primary education, then I wanted to go to a higher school, // I can remember, to a grammar school, but, well, the war broke out then. The war broke out, it was the year '39 already. ... I went to school in Łódź, then they exported us from there to Radomsko. I lived in Radomsko, for a short time, // for a short time, 'cause right after the war [broke out], and there I was arrested, with the roundups of all the children, those who attended schools, I can remember, they deported [them] to Germany, to do forced labour. Where I landed in Berlin, in 1940. They deported us to Germany and taught us, I remember, grade seven and eight it was. // And, they loaded us into the car, and transported us to Germany, to the forced labour. That was, to tell you, // I was arrested on 7th March 1940. I landed in Güstrow, it was [in] what is [= was] the DDR today [= then]. We worked in horticulture, in, like, a castle. I think I worked [there] for six months, // I cannot recall exactly. Then, after these six

148 From the account of Henryk Leszczyński, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no MSDP_164.

months, they transported me to Schwerin. Schwerin was also some 200 kilometres from Güstrow. I worked there as a slave, same thing as here [in Güstrow]. In a power plant, where we, I remember, carried coke along a track for... // for it to be combusted. From there, I went to Hamburg, half a year later. To Hamburg, but to the yard there, I was kept there for four days in the prison, that was the *Stadtpolizei*, I remember. Four days later, they transported me to *Neugame* [i.e. Neuengamme, the concentration camp (PF's note)], it was a newly-emerging camp near Hamburg, which I built for three months there. I can remember, it was the construction of the Elbe, of the Elbe channel; three months later, I was carried away from there to Mauthausen. In Mauthausen, I stayed until the very end, year '45. I was building Mauthausen, and from Mauthausen I was transported later on to Gusen. And in Gusen, I was one, number one in Gusen, and I stayed there till the very end, till the liberation, that is, the year '45, May the fifth, it was a Friday, at five in the afternoon. I can remember that. That's about it.¹⁴⁹

As it later turns out, this is not really about it – just a surface of the recollections, underneath which there is, however, no concise, coherent story, but rather, shreds of images recorded in the memory, not in each case assignable as to the place and time. This Interviewee does not attach much attention to such an assignment. He has stored in his memory a number of camp-time (as well as pre- and post-camp) experiences but has no actual story to offer. Such shreds are impossible to arrange in an order, to string precisely on a time axis, which we are otherwise accustomed to expect from a story, or autobiography. It is not quite the memory of the past events that fails to do its job – although this is what happens too. It is, rather, about the narrator being incapable of putting together these single fragments, building up a story, forging his experiences into a story based on these experiences. He has never done it, as nobody has ever asked him to do so. If he had ever recollected things – to his wife or children, for instance – he would have usually done it in such a dispersed, broken, fragmentary form; whereas the listener and researcher would like to understand the (hi)story of the individual/narrator being researched, stick the pieces together, and have the narrative form properly closed.

In a situation like this, it often happens that somebody has indeed made such an effort. In most cases, it is the survivor's spouse, who 'guards' her husband's story, sometimes acting as an expert on his personal (hi)story. She would make use of the moment of suspense in the mangled course of his narration and takes over the initiative, reminding of the incidents he has spoken about before. But at this point, the story actually turns into her own story, and she becomes involved quite forcefully in it.

[Interviewee's wife:] I will tell you, an interview like this at this [= my husband's] age today, my husband's forgotten already. Just as my husband returned in the year

149 From the account of Sylwin Józwiak, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_027.

'45, // you returned, right?, // and you arrived, // as you have told... As... // That was inhuman, all that, at all, you know... // They rushed to bathe, naked, frost, cold, snow. And there was a barrel standing on their way, and everyone had to, into that barrel, 'cause there was such, disinfection was, right? In that frost. You know, as my husband told it, // that was so inhuman. Today, he's forgotten everything.

More interesting than the attempted usurpation of the *kacet* memory is the couple's common elaboration of this memory (and the narrative). There now comes one of the many examples of such effort. My Interviewee does not himself mention any suffering he directly went through while imprisoned in the *Lager*. I ask him about this detail, knowing about various illnesses gnawing at him after the liberation, up until today:

Oh, I was repeatedly slapped in the mouth. [Wife:] He once got it on that trestle, then he was all blue. [PF:] What was that for? [SJ:] That was for the tomatoes. [Wife:] Not for the potatoes? [SJ:] No, for the potatoes, for the potatoes! [Wife:] He ate [some] somewhere in a dump, somewhere... [SJ:] Not in the dump, but, I reckon, I found... // Raw potatoes, some... // Got some potatoes, stole 'em, and, // as I walked to the camp, they caught me. [PF:] And who caught you? Some *Kapo*? [SJ:] No, an S[S]-man. [PF:] O dammit, and? [SJ:] Well, I had to take these potatoes out, and in front of ... that one I stood, and this was around ten, and, I remember, I stood till six, as all were going out from work. There I stood, and he pushed those potatoes into my mouth, like this. [PF:] And then on, there was... // Right? [SJ:] Well, the battering came later. [Wife:] You know, he had to, on such a trestle... // You know, there were such trestles, eh? // Bend over, and... // [SJ:] I mean, I had an inquisition, and that I had no punishment. // Then, well, for that he had to smash my ass, so that I was punished, to have it written on my ID that he's been punished. [Wife:] And they put a poultice on him, he was all blue. [PF:] And on the following day, go to work, as usual? [SJ:] Ah, absolutely! Just a towel and just, mister... // And, every four minutes, he had his ass dried. Whoever was in the camp, he knows what that means.¹⁵⁰

I evoke this narrative structure spun upon a story that is being agreed upon as it is told, since it clearly shows how the emerging narrative is pulled away from the witness's individual memory/oblivion, and into his wife's memory – becoming a separate entity, a collage. I also present this particular fragment in order to draw the reader's attention to the fact that among these shreds, fragments, unrelated or loosely related episodes, there is a submersed experience of suffering, pain, and trauma. It is submersed all the deeper as the Interviewee does not focus on it, perceiving his *Lager* sufferings as one more burden of fortune, the dispensation of Providence. Life is woven from such strands of suffering, and there is not much one can do about it. In the jagged memories of unpractised narrators, most of them being simple and poor individuals, there a boundary that is in flux between one's *Lager* experience and one's life as a free individual stands out. The *Lager* has

150 Ibidem.

heightened, sharpened the misery of their situation. The important moments in the biography – such as the outbreak of the war, deportation to a forced labour camp, arrest/detention, imprisonment, the camp, the liberation, the return to Poland – do not make incisions as radical as in the case of the other narrators, former conspirators included. Here, a continuum of experiences reappears more distinctly. These experiences are, in a way, ones of a permanent trajectory, which is more or less intensified depending on the period in one's life. I quote these fragments non-proofread, uncensored (which applies to all the fragments of accounts quoted in this book; here, it is perhaps worth emphasising). Their harsh, torn, broken and at times vulgar language is an integral part of the narrators' experience.

Oh, the history of [my] life is sad, it makes me ashamed to talk about it. You know, there were nine kids... // My father died age[d] fifty-four. He came over; he worked before the First World War yet. And my father was a pensioner, he came over [when he was] thirty-seven years [old], bought a farm. There, just where it is now. One of the... // 'Cause there were only two people there, some relatives, childless, you know, that farm [was] one of the most splendid, there was an orchard, bees. My father got married, and here... // There was the five of us. He somehow went to the war [i.e. WWII – PF's note], two years [he] wasn't there... // In the war, and he returned, and later on, just... // No, he didn't return yet. The front extended up to here, look, there, the rivulet that is there, it was the front[line]. The *Russkis* [colloq., Russians], as they were retreating, they expelled the whole village, not just ours, others too. And they drove, in front of them, and... // Then, as they left, must've been here, near Sokółka, then, from us... // No, that's in Sokolany. There, the *Russkis* withdrew yet [resident of Polish eastern borderland area, the narrator uses here the Russian 'uzhe' for 'yet' (Transl. note)], they expelled them, and there, the Germans already [*uzhe*] met them, as they, as it was something, as in the war, then there were the various fronts, and the Germans: '*Kuda!* [Russian, 'Where to?'] The Germans drew back, they returned themselves – the whole village is burnt! [*shouting*] The mother, five children, the husband's at war, five children, she cried, only the hens remained, 'cause there was the orchard, the raspberries were there, the bees, the beehives broken, trampled, and here's just ashes, nothing; they said, one of the most splendid farms [it] was. Five children, the woman... You know what sort of life that was, to come back to ashes? When the stepfather came, a careless man, still four from the stepfather, nine kids [altogether]... There, before the war, mister, Poland... // It was all a stench in the villages before the war....

It was fucking terrible in the villages, the stench, poverty, there were huts that had no table inside, no cupboard, bed-linen, the beds were made with straw, the roofs, all of them, with straw. Man! Thresh it with a fucking flail!?

There came what you called the scarcity, the spring, there was no bread in the villages, hunger... [*shouting*] You won't believe in what it was like in Poland, illiteracy, because... ... Then, the people, as they were walking, then, see, slippers or some gaiters, they hung a stick over their backs, get shoes from the church, from the church, get undressed [i.e. remove the shoes; the narrator uses a rather weird,

combined Russian-Polish phrase *rosdevaet się* (Transl. note)] again, as home, home you go... Then, barefoot, maidens, bachelors, in the evening as they went out, then, all barefoot. There's more of that, sir, as that stubble, as, for fuck's sake, you had to mow the ten hectares, the scythe, then needed to rake, pick up, barefoot in that stubble... Mister, for fuck's sake, once I recall, then, today...¹⁵¹

Now, one more image, from another narrative, remembered from the time before the war:

I perhaps was, like, // like my sons, top-of-the-class too, but there was a woman teacher that I could not look at when in grade four, because that was a... // Well, I don't know, because the other children of the rich people, they gave contributions, such... // A hen, this or that, and I was poor, I couldn't bring her [anything like that]. And I... // was impaired in this way. And from grade five on, I went to another female teacher... // who was a good woman. But I couldn't, for there were two grades four, so, "You attended that one? Now, you go there!" In the fifth, I wouldn't be accepted. I... // And my father was glad of the fact that I didn't want to attend it. And, a week passed, then another one. I didn't go to school, and so things stayed. Can you understand? Such was the time before the war, because you, the young, you cannot know what it was like before the war...

I was, kind of, a boy... I was fourteen, fifteen years old already, sir, and there, the squire announced that he would pay two zloty for digging potatoes. Per day. It was October already, for the ground frost had already appeared and he was afraid that they were freezing. So, there, the people from the whole area, let's presume, fifty, sixty people, went to dig those potatoes. And I, along with the others, went to dig those potatoes. Because, not... // You don't know what it looks like, but the digging was done manually... // Well, and there we walked... // No, wait. // And I got a slip of paper, a small one, for she didn't pay at once, he was to pay later on.. And then, sir, I put it into my cap, for I had no pockets. And, by the church, // because you were passing the church as you walked to that place, // I took my cap off, and it fell out. And I came home and want[ed] to boast to my mum, that I'd earned two zloty. I took my cap off – they money's not there! I started crying. Because, well, I was still then, you can say, a child, wasn't I. And then, my elder brother, mother, father, I should think... // But two zloty was quite a lot, so I will, I'll go tomorrow, then I'll have one zloty. In two days... // And so, we went for the whole week to dig, and then, we chased our money until Christmas. Whenever we dropped in, those people, then: 'The lord is not back from the bank yet'; at nine in the evening... // In October [*laughs*]. And, all said and done, sir, well indeed, he paid us, eighty grosz each, what was supposed to be two zloty each. Yes, well, because such, such was the law then.¹⁵²

151 From the account of Antoni Żak, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_107.

152 From the account of Teofil Płonka, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_066.

In stories of this kind, it is so clearly apparent how an individual's lot may be dependent on the social conditions – not to say, structural determinants. Moreover, the continuations of biographical stories thus initiated display a number of similarities and tangential points. They are very different from the stories told by those who can look for the sense of their camp experiences in the fact that they were put in a *kacet* for their participation in the conspiracies or struggle. These peasant, rustic narratives usually evoke the outbreak of World War II as one of the stages in their biographical trajectory. These narratives generally tend to neglect notions such as Poland, homeland, defence, or struggle. Struggle is present there in private terms, however: as a struggle for survival, biological subsistence, a no less dramatic one. A broader historical context is reduced to the concreteness of one's individual, or, possibly, local, experience. For the Interviewees from what are today Poland's eastern counties, the local experience constitutes the following Occupations: the Soviet and the German ones, with the resulting restricted freedom, deteriorated situation, compulsory work, fear, and direct repressions. Soviet repressions came first:

The war broke out, that's what, you know – in '39. Well, the Germans entered. Two weeks after, the Germans come back and shout as they go by: "*Russen, Russen komm!*" That the *Russki[s]* will come. There was nothing there – lawlessness. ... Nobody, neither the *Russkis*, nor the Germans, there was nobody, such lawlessness there was. After two weeks, the *Russkis* arrived, yes... // By, like, normal, such, freight cars, they went to there¹⁵³, to the village, and the *Russkis* began ruling us...

Mister, they were building fortifications on the border of East Prussia. Mister, the mare got foaled so that stepfather had to tie the foal, lay it, ... and go fifty kilometres, as there was the deportation.... You know, and they rushed, fuck, the entire villages. There you'd buy no food, so you had to take some food for the horse, for yourself, some food. And after a week, after two, they kept, fucking, there, they were digging, you know, there were no excavators – with spades. They'd carry [it] somewhere, to some pigsty, or to a barn, they'd give some straw, lay down, no cover for yourself, no way to make your bed, or, with anything, as you want it, there's only a pile lying by the spade, and so.....

Thinning out the forest... Fuck it! From our place they drove us as far as to Łomża, as far as here. You'll get it, you have to work out thirty [?] cubic metres of the forest and carry this away; then, a richer man had to go there by horses [i.e. a cart], fifty kilometres you go, and just do this take-away thing! And that forest you were supposed... but, what to castrate [orig., *rezat'*, a local idiom, of (Belo)Russian origin – Transl note] it with? No kind of a saw, or axe, there was naught, nothing to buy, and the people didn't have, 'cause there was the Polish, fucking, poverty, there was no axe, and there was nothing!...

153 In the original, the narrator from time to time resorts to local idioms used in the Polish eastern borderland area, sounding like, or simply being, (Belo)Russian borrowings; here, *prishli* for 'they went' (Transl. note).

Man, that was... these compulsory supplies, the meat... // The potatoes, the rye, that and the manufacturing, horrible there, this fortifying of these borders, then there was no machinery, and you had to do it with your hands. And they were digging those, on the border there, those, fucking, pits, bunkers they were making, pouring, they already had those grinders for the stones. And, the forts on these borders, there, and not just from our village, this in all the villages. ... He'd arrive [orig., *priyehdzhal*; do.], for example, then, that the whole commune [*gmina*], well, they assigned, which villages, which date. By carts, whoever with the carriage, whoever the, whatever, and then they gave the direction, fifty kilometres...

Under the Soviets, then, we, here... // Fuck, you know, two deportations were already in our area. The Soviets deported, like, suspect families. Suspect... // One year, they were for two years [here], I think, // one year, the thing... // In February, coincidentally, such frost, snow was, the deportation was in the time, in the period of this frost, you know, [the deportation] of all the gamekeepers, foresters, the ones somewhere from the [Civil] Militia, officials, sort of, suspect ones, sort of. Who gave those people to them, to the Soviets, who should bloody tell me; but on the night, on such a February night, the frost, the snow was, then they deported some, and then, right before the [Soviet-German – PF's note] war [i.e. before June 22nd, 1941], before the outbreak of the war, somewhere, fuck; the war, when did it break out, in which...? [PF:] June '41. [AŽ:] Then it must've been around May, or at the beginning of June they were deporting, then, a few families also from our place. They arrived like that, see, [and took] the whole families, but this in some [? of the villages/places]; they deported some, there, somewhere far away, to Siberia, and some others they only displaced. What a deportation was that, how afraid all the people were!¹⁵⁴

Later on, repression, initially not much different, came from the Germans:

There was a quota, per each village, // not just me alone. They deported me too... // Because, what was there, well? A large family, hunger, poverty. The Germans didn't set anything up there, either: no shops, not that they'd import something, they gave nothing to this place. What is it that you could have to provide with, or for me, my three sisters, three [brothers] younger than me, moreover, well, what was there to live on, what to do? The farm in ruins, fuck all, no way, the people gave horses away to no avail [=? for free] under those ['first'] Soviets... Man, because, the more horses, the more labour they gave you, more of the takeaway, more of all [orig., dial., *vshevo*] there was. What could he do, the quota was there on us, then the *soltys* [village head] came [orig., dial., *prishol*] and recorded us, 'cause, well, he was making lists, such as [it was] obligatory. I had [orig., dial., *U menia byl*] an elder brother, the rest were younger, 'cause later, one more was deported to Germany, stepfather's [son], to Germany, to the labour, us, here, twenty-five were deported [from] here at once, towards East Prussia [we] went.¹⁵⁵

154 From the account of Antoni Żak, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_107.

155 Ibidem.

A crucial trait of rural Occupation-time experience is apparent here. On the one hand, the labourers' departure for Germany is forced by the German Occupation regulations, referred to in this narrative as a quota, whereas, on the other, it is outwardly voluntary: the family can make a shared decision about which one of its members would go. Why is this voluntariness apparent? Because it is merely formal; the legal coercion becomes simply replaced by an economic and existential compulsion. Such constraint is perhaps harder to bear and more devastating when the family has to calculate and then settle the question of which of the children is to stay and which to go on this journey. For those people, it was a voyage into the absolute unknown:

There were the two of us: one, the elder, the generation of [19]23, a brother; and I was the generation of '25. Well, and...? My father says, 'One, the Germans said that they have to take one [of you] to, to the force... forced labour, there.' I say, // well, what, I was still only seventeen, well, what would I help, // help, mister. No ploughing, no-so-on, no, sometime... // With horses, and so on, no... // I think to myself: the older one, he will be helping, with something. He was nineteen then, and I was, // there came the seventeenth year with me. Well, and...? // [I] went, for my brother. Because, for the brother, and since there must be someone... Well, then I was taken ... to the forced labour. Well, and they carried me away, mister, to Königsberg, from Königsberg... // Oooh, mister, there they disposed of us, and I finally got to a *Bauer's* place, to Pilau...¹⁵⁶

In some cases, the decision to go is, however, evoked in a different manner: not in such dramatic terms, but as the beginning of an adventure, an opportunity to meet a different, better world, to do work that was not as hard as that at home. Sometimes, it really appeared to be so:

And moreover, you wanted to go out somewhere, into the world, when young... Not only myself, from our village there were, I think, some fifteen, for there were from the other villages as well, there were, altogether. Go into the world. ... The *soltys* was walking round and round, where [there were] such large families. I had [orig., dial., *U menia byl*] an older brother, then he, apparently, were here already, and the younger, I fit it just right. Well, and what was it, to whom, you had to point out, who was to go. Well, accidentally, such a, me, // [I] was, such a, as if, the freest.¹⁵⁷

The very moment of arrest is usually absent in the stories of these 'ordinary' Interviewees, in a manner as distinct as in the more 'heroic' and 'patriotic' stories of conspirators who happened to get caught or fell victim to a denunciation. Images belonging to the latter group are preserved and cultivated by the memory – one

156 From the account of Stefan Puc, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_110.

157 From the account of Antoni Żak, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_107.

simple reason being that they tend to be more frequently evoked. In most cases, they are the crucial points of (auto)biography, separating its two extremely different stages. They clearly mark the beginning of the trajectory experience, and are key to the narrators' identities and in adding sense or meaning to their subsequent experiences of prisons and *Lagers*. In the aforementioned category, they more frequently simply form one of the biographical episodes, yet another hopeless situation, of which many took place earlier as well as later on. These narrators do not have a special reason for contemplating such a moment for too long, nor do they attach more attention to this specific moment in their biographies than to any other.

And I was twenty, nineteen years old when I had, sir, there was the so-called *Baudienst* – do you know what *Baudienst* means? It was [like] that 'Service to Poland'¹⁵⁸ after the war, with the Germans. All the young people aged... were conscribed for the *Baudienst*. I, // I was taken, and I fled and, well, stayed in hiding in here. I didn't hide to the extent as I hid afterwards... // Well, and in June '43, sir... Some *Volkdeutsch* was here, he knew that I was home. For it actually quietened down thus, and so it was. And they took the three of us, two brothers and myself. The gendarmes arrived at night, cordoned the house off, with the Navy Blue Police [i.e. the Polish police of the General Government (Transl. note)]. For it was imputed that we were in the underground army. In the underground army we were not, so I cannot say that I was in the underground army, as we were not. For there was yet no such partisan organisation, there were only the thieves....

And until September the fourteenth was I kept in the gaol, because there, later on, // they were to release us, because they had freed one [of my] brother[s], for he worked in Radomsko, // you know, // and that director, a German, of that plant to [? addressed/requested] the gendarmes. // And he was released, for he was a good employee, a mechanic. And us, the two brothers, they took away to Auschwitz.¹⁵⁹

This is one of the numerous 'regular' stories about arrest as a punishment for escape from a construction works or forced labour site. While the escape (or, simply, quitting the job and making the long journey to one's home village) could have been successful, the home often appeared to be not exactly a safe haven or shelter. After all, the Germans would chase after such refugees in their home, in the first place. The neighbours, or the local village major (*soltys*), could give those doing the chasing a hand, be it out of fear. The humility with which these events are evoked appears extraordinary; it may be a trace of the humbleness that was shown as they occurred.

I'm being kept in that custody, like, of the sort, my father comes [to] me up to the window and says, 'Listen, son, that Koronko man's put you in; the *soltys*'; says, he's

158 *Śłużba Polsce*, a State paramilitary youth organisation, founded in 1948 (Transl. note).

159 From the account of Teofil Płonka, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_066.

the one. Well, too bad, well, what’s it that I should do here, mister? The next day, [they put] me into the carts there, and, to Bielsk [Podlaski (PF’s note)]. They carried [me] to Bielsk, to the *Lager* [orig., dial., *v lagru*], mister, there... // In twos, one hour of time: “Get down! Stand up! Down! Up! Down! Up!” And then, well, we worked at, some sort of, uh, // in some mine, that the coal, you... or something... // the turf, was dug. And, two weeks....

On March the fifth, everybody there, mister, he’s driving, and us, mister... // The SS, us... // They loaded us into ... a train, and you wouldn’t know: [we] were going, going to... // arriving, pulling up in Gdańsk, that I remember [orig., dial., *to pomnya!*], and in Gdańsk, and walked through the city. There were one hundred of us walking plus one person, ... one hundred and one people. And, sir, they led [us] through this... // and there, to the ferry. The ferry, can remember, to that ferry, they drove us up to that ferry, well, and ... from that ferry // we got loaded onto those, into that [narrow-gauge] train, and carried [us] up to the camp of Stutthof. To Stutthof.¹⁶⁰

A failed attempt at escaping forced labour – for instance, leaving a *Bauer’s* farm – was not the only reason for putting the offender in a KZ. To be placed in a concentration camp, it sometimes sufficed simply to fall into disfavour when staying at a forced labour site, by using an unwanted word or behaving inappropriately. Such a transit to the camp takes a pretty ordinary, unexposed place in the story – and, presumably, in the memory too:

I had no court [case], without any discussion. Had no court, they just imprisoned [me], [I] was detained, but an investigation went on somewhere. And then, it’s just, uh, // they told [me] to go out, // a car stood there, to the car, and they carted [me] to that camp straight away.¹⁶¹

I have deliberately focused, in the foregoing description of the characteristic traits of the narratives of former inmates put into the Nazi *Lagers* between 1941 and 1944 as a punishment, on the fragments referring to the experiences preceding the camp itself. It is these experiences that, to a prevailing extent, shaped the ensuing camp lot of the prisoners of this group. I use the term ‘group’ in a colloquial sense, since, when in the camp, they did not form any distinct collectivity. It is very different with the eldest prisoners – the group I mentioned earlier, and the youngest, in terms of their camp seniority, who were put in a *Lager* during the Warsaw Uprising; I will cover this group at more length in the following section. Some members of the middle group managed to make up for a delay of a few or months or even a year or so, which originally separated them from the old, senior *Häftlings* who had put down roots in the

160 From the account of Stefan Puc, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_110.

161 From the account of Antoni Żak, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_107.

camp. This exercise proved successful mostly with those who came across the other inmates who extended a hand to them, as a result of their involvement in the conspiracy, personal acquaintances, shrewdness, and a stroke of luck. Soon after, they could include themselves in the elite group of the eldest, as they factually belonged to it. Thus, the following self-determination of an Interviewee, who was arrested for participation in the conspiracy and detained in Auschwitz in the spring of 1942 (and later relocated to Mauthausen), is completely legitimate:

Being a scribe, I did not go to work during the day. I had a window open, and we talked freely to each other with that Ukrainian woman, on our way. At one point, I see her shut the window, and flee from that window. Well, then I thought that there was some alert, some SS woman entered the block, and that's why she's escaping. Then, I'm closing the window slowly as well, turning, and there's an SS-man standing behind me. Golly... [*laughs*] Well, and he, at me: don't I know that I am not supposed to talk to the women? I say, I do. It's just that I talk to a woman at a distance, that far, and you've got the women, sir, on a daily basis and talk to them closely. He glanced at me so, looked at the number, notices that I've got an old one, and, thus: 'Well, this is the last time I saw it, understood?' '*Jawohl, mein Sturmführer!*' 'Got any cigarettes?' 'Well, I've got some.' 'Give me.' I gave him a packet, or two, of cigarettes, and off he went.

One more picture from Auschwitz, in the same story, portrayed with a similar wantonness and glibness:

Being a long-serving prisoner, having the acquaintances, having the mates, you'd no more have to rely on that camp food. You'd arrange food for yourself, do some cooking. ... In 1944, at Christmas, one colleague worked in the food store, another one in some storeroom too, and they had access to the foodstuffs. One worked in a slaughterhouse, and so they organised some sausages, or something of the sort. And, we organised that food, and swapped it among us. Well, so, for Christmas we had organised all the victuals, alcohol included. There were contacts with civilians, and you could buy from them. After all, there was the 'Kanada' thing, and you organised things also from those transports which were arriving, Jewish and others. Some three, four days before Christmas, *Rapportführer* Hartwig plunges into my block. I had a chamber allocated for me at the very end [of the block], an office, sort of, there were plank beds, and we lived there, the four of us. It was obligatory that, as an SS-man enters the block, the first inmate who sees him must shout, '*Achtung!*' He crept in then, nobody shouted '*Achtung!*', or anything at all, and he came in. Besides, that was by day, so the *Kommandos* were at work, and the block was basically empty. And, he crept into that small office of mine. I reported things to him, in conformity with the regulations. And he's asking me what I have prepared for the Christmas. I'm saying, 'I've got nothing.' 'Don't you tell me tales that you've got nothing.'

Here follows a description of the search of his 'small office', with the SS-man finding the Christmas supplies and confiscating them. This does not incite the narrator to alter the form of his narrative: he maintains its – so to say – adventure convention:

What am I going to say to my mates now, 'Hartwig was [here] and took everything?' Why did I let him, they'll ask straight away. But it turned out that my colleagues came, got upset, but they're saying that we've still got three days [*laughs*]. And we had the same thing. And the SS-men toured the blocks, as they knew that the block guards, the *Schreibers* and other functionals [i.e. functional prisoners] have got something organised; that the old prisoners do not live on the camp cuisine.¹⁶²

Meanwhile, the others, who arrived at the camp at a similar time or a little later, soon turned into the *Lager* pariahs who constantly oscillated between life and death. Some crossed this borderline several times during their inmate career. Such vicissitudes were extremely frequent for those who had been taken to a *kacet* from a rural environment, or directly from forced labour. Such individuals were the loneliest in the camp. Many of them died in Mauthausen, as confirmed by various studies, and by certain generalising statements made by other survivors in their published memoirs or oral narratives. This high mortality rate is one more, perhaps the most important, reason why testimonies for this particular group of inmates are so scarce. One of my Interviewees, who during the over eighteen months of his imprisonment never managed to find himself at a safe distance from the borderline with death, endeavoured to help me understand his situation in the camp thus:

Fortunately, I managed to survive; well, I don't know what I owe it to. Well, in the first place, my organism was strong. That's probably the only reason. Because, it was thanks to my own health, my own, // the power of my health, that I withstood. For to stand it for so many months in the camps, under your own steam, nineteen months and five days, it makes your mind boggle. [PF:] And, during your stay in the camp, did you have the chance to 'organise' some extra food, at times? [JB:] Absolutely not! [PF:] Never ever? [JB:] No way. ... [PF:] Then, you didn't receive anything as an extra, just the stuff available in the camp? [JB:] Absolutely nothing! And this is exactly the point: to live and survive on that concrete [stuff], that's a real skill. [PF:] That is amazing, I haven't yet met anyone who never got anything more than this minimum. [JB:] Oh, yeah! That's what I'm talking about! When... // who say that he's been in the camp for some [time], then I... // May he survive like I have survived. // [PF:] Then, you survived the camp with no privileges, completely? [JB:] Without anything, without anything, nothing. I had no parents, my brother was dead, just my sister-in-law remained, for [when] I was in the army, my brother died. A sudden death, of heart failure, an infarct. Only the sister was [there], then, what [could] she [do] there, poor thing, a woman, on her own... // And somewhere there, in Nadbuże [i.e. the area stretching along the Bug River], with those Ukrainians, dangerous it was. And me, all alone, I didn't have anything. I just bore it, I alone, thanks to my own health. This is, // that's exactly what I mean! That it's only such a prisoner, the one has... he who could stand it.

162 From the account of Florian Granek, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_086 (recorded by Michał Zarzycki).

It would probably be appropriate to add one more fragment of this narrative, where my Interviewee refers to his situation in the first weeks after the liberation. This image very powerfully authenticates his preceding words:

Those who hadn't been in the camp [and could leave its area after the liberation – PF's note], they jaunted, somewhere to the town, to that, they did something, like trading, or, I don't know [what]. But I wasn't able to walk out anywhere, the only thing that was good for me that the subsistence was decent already. I was only sitting inside the barrack, nothing else, and nourished myself. And they left as much food for me as I could have eaten. The goulashes, various ones, were very tasty, the rice on canned food [? canned rice], the pastas on canned food, oily, very tasty. So, this is how I fed myself, I laughed at that point that I'd lived to see some human food.

Departing, leaving the camp was the thing I completely didn't think of, for I wasn't capable [of it]. After all, I wouldn't be able to climb into a car [i.e. vehicle/truck], or get out, or, onto a train, or, where[ver else]. I couldn't walk unaided anymore. And so, they were organising a transport, the Poles were organising a transport, any volunteers, anyone to go first? Well, there were, there were a lot... Well, exactly, such, these Varsovians, for instance, who had been for six months in the camp, or five, then he still could move – but I, who had been there for nineteen months? That [= I] was a tiny corpse, a regular tiny dead body, a skeleton, some tiny bones, and skin. Then I, there was no question, I didn't think about it.

And, lastly, I don't know, that lasted, already, [in] May, the whole of May, June, July – three months, then I already had taken some nourishment, in any case. But what was unsatisfactory for me, terrible, point blank: they're liquidating the camp! Everybody's willing to go, they're liquidating, and me, how will I cope? [*silence*] Who's there to lend me a hand?! ... I was too weak, for someone [= me] to handle such things. Then, you had to go somewhere, get to know something, and I was in no position [to do it].¹⁶³

The camp fate of this group of inmates unfolded somewhere between these extremes, but also inclusive of them. Their vicissitudes reflect almost any and all possible ways, diverse methods of tackling situations, and disasters occurring to *kacety* inmates. It is therefore unfeasible to recognise what is specific or distinctive within the camp experience itself. The experience of those who were brought in 1942–3 to perform permanent jobs in any of the armament factories at the Mauthausen subcamps lies somewhere in the middle. While they were not prominent inmates, they usually kept themselves at a safe distance from the *Lager* precipices. Their experience features, in most cases, a prevalent thread of permanent effort aimed at not losing this privileged position (given the camp circumstances) and, as far as possible, they relatively quietly persevered until the end. These efforts sometimes ended with success.¹⁶⁴ But this is, again, just one of the numerous options: most of

163 From the account of Józef Bednarczyk, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_069.

164 It is worth remembering that in 1942, owing to the wartime demand, the Nazis modified their concentration camp policy: originally intended as sites of extermination,

the prisoners put in the camp in the aforesaid period were many a time transferred from one labour *Kommando* to another, and from one camp to another. This was not always meant a promotion: the reverse movement was intensified as well.

In spite of the diversity of the wartime – especially, camp-related – experiences of this particular group of former inmates (referring here to a 'group' in a colloquial, rather than a sociological, sense), it seems that an observant, comparative and parallel reading of their oral autobiographies makes sense; in particular, from a sociologist's standpoint. In the stories of these people, the *Lager* experience appears, as I have emphasised several times, to be one of the many trajectorial wartime experiences. It is not the most important experience in every case; yet, analysis of these accounts enables us to ascertain one further thing, which is even more interesting sociologically. We clearly find that within the universe of concentration camps, with all its weirdness and incongruence with normal social reality, the social distances, tensions, cracks and splits powerfully exerted their influences; in fact, they did so with an enhanced strength. This is, naturally, true for the interpersonal interactions taking place inside the camp. While the prisoners had brought such interactions in with them, the *kacety* sorely sharpened them. If finally met, the liberation did not fully extend to these dimensions. For many a survivor, this meant that their lifelong/social limitations, determinisms, or, simply, trajectories were continued – albeit in a form not as severe as while behind the camp's wall or barbed wire, and no more subject to direct violence:

I returned to the homeland via Austria; on the frontier, when I saw those Polish liberators, then, God, muckworms, well, I don't know, // whatever we had, we had to give to them They rifled through our things, really unbelievable. And, you were finally back in Poland – and then you regretted you had returned. Well, what? I'm going to be frank with you. I had a visa, I had a visa for America, I had one to Baltimore and I had a visa to Perth in Australia. I used neither, as Stasiuś [Stanisław Grzesiuk] prompted me to return home. And I did return home, and became a jobless person, and that's all, you know.¹⁶⁵

And, one more image:

I arrived home, there in Hrubieszów area, where those Ukrainians were, I arrived, and everything is burnt down all around the area, the whole of Nadbuże, the whole county, north to south, there were only the chimneystacks, which were sticking out. The Ukrainians had burnt [the buildings in the area] one after another, the partisan forces exchanged blows mutually there, burnt it down, there. [*silence*] I came to a

from then on the camps were primarily supposed to become the source of the free labour force. For the Jews, what the year 1942 marked was just the converse: the beginning of mass-scale annihilation.

165 From the account of Sylwin Józwiak, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_027.

burnt house. Faint and frail, how to live on then? Everyone's expelled, driven out, burnt out [*long silence*].¹⁶⁶

Stories like these obviously have their continuations, which reveal the strife throughout their narrators' biographies.

The war has destroyed... and right after the war, there was poverty like the devil, but I somehow, how can I put it? I lived by my wits, wiggled, that is, no scheming, // I just endeavoured, took out a lease on a field.... I was searching, always, I kept an animal husbandry plot, you know. I was the first in the village to erect a pigpen, like, and a corridor set straight through, the first to make a potato silo, first to set up these screens, to put up a potato column, I contracted many things of the sort, // then I made an effort, ran [the farming/breeding business].¹⁶⁷

In these everyday exertions, his own camp experience disappears from the field of attention, but never evanesces completely. What has never been reelaborated, is unuttered, unwritten, yet leaves nonetheless a persistent trace, which now, in the last years of his life, repeatedly bothers him and reappears in a variety of ways:

You know what. My opinion is this: If I'd been born earlier and grown older, then I might've perhaps not survived the camp. Whereas I still wasn't, I was young... // On the other hand, this is what I think to myself: had I not been in the camp, I would've been in [= joined] the gangs. For this is how even my colleagues perished. ... So I, should I... not have been in the camp, then I would've been the first, again...? For there were the three of us, then none would've been saved, you know? So, I just don't know how to say that.¹⁶⁸

The point is this: about such things, it would be good to write out, note down, but I was shitty, mucky, dilapidated, overworked with that labour, and my wife worked hard, and me [too], for you, fucking, were made ... a *soltys*, and that purchasing centre after that, then the vodka, and all that, and the labour, that I, those notes, then you should... // 'Cause these are the serious things, these are, you know...¹⁶⁹

3.3 Varsovians

The third, and last, type of Lager experience (and narrative related to it) I have distinguished is recognisable in the autobiographical accounts of those of my interviewees who were detained in (one of) the concentration camp(s) in the

166 From the account of Józef Bednarczyk, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no MSDP_069.

167 Ibidem.

168 From the account of Teofil Płonka, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_066.

169 From the account of Antoni Żak, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_107.

summer and autumn of 1944, during the course of the Warsaw Uprising, and were deported together with local civilians via the transit camp of Pruszków near Warsaw. This is the most recognisable group of camp survivors who were former Polish political prisoners – not only for Warsaw alone but, on a broader scale, within the Polish *kacety* memory landscape. It is, moreover, the most active group, with its members participating in anniversary celebrations and other commemorative rituals, appearing in the greatest numbers at the former camp to attend liberation anniversary celebrations, as well as participating in numbers at meetings with Polish and German youth. They are the most dominant group in the local milieu of *Lager* inmates. Biology gives the simple answer to the question of why this is so: whilst not the largest, they are, however, the youngest group of Polish inmates – those who were put in the camp at the last moment, months before the liberation. The youngest of the group are aged over eighty today. Those rare former inmates from the first transports of 1940 who are still alive today are some twenty years older.

The wartime and camp-time vicissitudes of the prisoners whose accounts I have specified as the third type share the most similarities with each other. In many respects, this group of survivors is the most homogeneous, although there are some contrapuntal narratives, which render the image more complicated and undermine any overly strong or simple generalisations. While bearing this in mind, I will all the same try to point out a few crucial moments in the narratives of this particular group. They indicate certain similar, sometimes downright common, historical experiences. The most powerful and distinct moment in all these (auto) biographies, their definite turning point, is detention/arrest during the Warsaw Uprising, the subsequent transportation to the transit camp in Pruszków and, later, to the concentration camp and, finally, incarceration there. For some of our Warsaw-based Interviewees, Auschwitz was the camp they were first transported to, Mauthausen (and, subsequently, its various subcamps) being the second; but for a still larger group, Mauthausen came first.¹⁷⁰

For the Warsaw group of former inmates, these wartime experiences prove to be exceptional, staggering, and traumatic. However paradoxical such gradation may sound, they could be described as even more unique, stupefying and traumatic than the (objectively) similar experiences of the remaining survivors; including those who stayed in the camps the longest. What makes them like this? What is the reason for their dwelling on memory in such a peculiar manner? The broader biographical context in which they are embedded is probably the most concise answer.

170 Mauthausen and its subcamps received in the summer of 1944 some 5,000 prisoners from Warsaw. All had passed through the transit camp in Pruszków (Dulag 121). Some, those who joined the first transport, which departed from Pruszków on 9th August, were first put in Auschwitz-Birkenau (the subsequent transports were sent to Mauthausen directly from Pruszków).

The salient point is that in 1944, during the Uprising and afterwards, during their stay in the camps, most of our Warsaw Interviewees were very young people, some were even just children. Although their childhood partly coincided with the Occupation years, it has been fixed in the memory, in most cases, as a relatively ordinary, safe time, passed under their parents' roof and supervision. Even though they were involved in some conspiratorial actions, or in scouting activities – specifically, as part of the Grey Ranks organisation – they recollect this today, in most cases, as risky but good fun, the consequences of which they could not anticipate. It thus appears, in comparison with what came later, as though that world came to a sudden end: they were completely unexpectedly pulled from it, separated from their parents and siblings, and thrown into the camps at the moment they were the most full, with the highest numbers of prisoners dying, and the greatest chaos prevailing. This brutal passage from one world into the other forms a radical biographical incision in the survivors' memory. The several months spent in the camp(s) breaks down their autobiographies into two non-congruent parts, which they find difficult to put into one, coherent autobiographical story. There remains an unhealed wound between these parts.

This diagnosis obviously does not refer in an equal degree to all the former prisoners who were placed in concentration camps during the Warsaw Uprising, deported from the city as civilians. People of various ages were sent to the camps, bearing the burden of varied pre-war and Occupation experiences, of which many were tragic. Some of the youngest still survive, and it is they with whom we could talk. The records of these interviews – audio-/videotaped or transcribed – not only feature the names of the same Warsaw streets and squares but also offer certain recognisable similar biographical structures, identical trajectories. Let us take a more careful look at them, by evoking the voices of some of the Interviewees from this group – primarily, those youngest ones.¹⁷¹

Let us begin with a few close-up views of the experiences under the Occupation. Most importantly, all the following fragments appeared in the first phase of the interview – as part of an unrestrained narrative, when the Interviewees, not yet guided by the interviewer's questions, construct their own story about themselves, using their own language and freely evoking things of importance for them, thus defining their identities.

I attended my elementary school in Warsaw, at 192 Otwocka Street. My teacher was a superb woman named Ms Szuster, who died of cancer after the liberation. After

171 Among the Mauthausen survivors whose stories we have taped, some were detained in the camp together with the civilians from Warsaw although they themselves were mature individuals during the war, strongly involved in conspiratorial activities, including armed activities. Rather than belonging to the type I am identifying here, their stories represent the previously discussed category, in its conspiracy-related variant. This is also often true for their later situation in the camp; see the account of Zbigniew Dłubak, MS DP_156.

I completed six forms of my elementary school, in the year 1939, I took an [entry] examination for the '[King] Władysław IV' State Gymnasium [i.e. junior high school] in Warsaw, in Praga [i.e. the capital city's right-bank district (Transl. note)]. I passed the exam successfully and was listed as the Gymnasium student. The war broke out. In October, we all turn up at the Gymnasium and even attended the classes in the first week. Then, came the invader's instructions that the Gymnasium be closed down. I faced – perhaps not that *I* faced, for I was a child, I was twelve then, so, rather, my parents faced – the dilemma of what to do with my further education. Ms Szuster advised that I went to grade seven of the elementary school where she was also a tutor. I joined that grade, and completed it. Meanwhile, my parents got in touch with the teachers giving secret classes at 'Władysław IV' Gymnasium, among others, with Mr Usarek, the principal for these classes. This way, since I completed seven elementary-school grades, and could enrol with a gymnasium with six grades completed, I was enrolled as a second-grade student straight away. I attended the gymnasium during the Occupation period, until the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising. In 1944, I completed my first secondary-school grade at a Humanities Lyceum [senior high school].¹⁷²

Two more fragments, among the many similar ones appearing in these narratives – in their unrestrainedly constructed initial sections:

The Occupation followed. Our mum took care to provide for us, she continued to run the shop; I attended my school, my sister was at home with the housekeeper. So went on the dull Occupation days.¹⁷³

The wartime: there were ups and downs. My father worked removing debris in fits and starts, but mostly doing bricklaying jobs. My elder brother, in turn, as the embassy was closed, found work as a waiter with a café in Nowy-Świat St. [in Warsaw]. My middle brother got a job somewhere in a café as a waiter as well. And so we persisted for these few years of the occupation status, until the outbreak of the Uprising on 1st August 1944.¹⁷⁴

These are banal images of daily life, a life that flows with a tolerably quiet current, circumventing the obstacles. The outbreak of the war, the campaign of the Defence War of September 1939, the bombings, executions by firing squads, roundups, fear of the Germans, the Ghetto and the Ghetto uprising: the narrators appear not to be overly preoccupied with any of these occurrences, if at all. The war is there, yes, but it is somewhat in the background – mostly as the problem of the parents

172 From the account of Janusz Domański, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_074 (recorded by Dorota Pazio).

173 From the account of Jan Chodakowski, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_133 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb).

174 From the account of Henryk Matulko, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_129 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb).

who want their son to continue his education after the school is closed down. Therefore, they have to solicit clandestine learning opportunities for him. All this is recounted as if it were about replacing one school for another in ordinary, peacetime circumstances: for instance, owing to moving house, unsatisfactory teaching standards; or, as a problem affecting an older brother or sister due to their involvement in conspiratorial dealings.

Unlike the rather quiet memories just referred to, some of these regular recollections of a childhood spent in a city under Occupation more vividly portray the details of specific occurrences, childhood or bachelorhood adventures with the Occupation as a 'background story':

I went to school, I studied, I played cards – the vingt-et-un. Gambling-style. I was attracted to it, I got a taste for gambling. We met in Grajewska St., at a first-floor apartment, and there we played cards, for money, obviously. Where did I get money from? Well, my father gave me money for books. I bought those books, then sold them, and allocated the money thus received to the vingt-et-un play. Someday, my neighbour must've noticed me there, and she informed my father of everything. One day I went out, as though to walk my dog – walking our dog, Medor, was part of my daily routine – while I went, as usual, to play cards. We're playing, I'm getting more and more enthusiastic, I'm saying, "Bank for me!" and can hear at the same moment, "But let *me* take the cards." I'm looking: my father's standing behind me. That was the only time when my father didn't say a word to scold me, // nothing; // we walked back [home] in silence. That was telling enough for me. But I didn't quit playing cards. We just played elsewhere.

I could indeed have quite given myself air and graces. We had our entertainments: the cards, jumping – that is, jumping into and out of tramways. We did that our own way. Between Markowska St. and the Monopoly [i.e. the manufacturing plant of the State Spirit Monopoly (Transl. note)] there was a long [tram] stop. And, it required some skill to jump onto the tram and jump out, not 'downstream' but 'upstream'. You'd jump up bent over, so that the onward rush wouldn't knock you down. But you had to jump not into the second car but onto the second platform of the first. That was suicidal, wasn't it? Of course, this was trifling entertainment, puerile, but still, dangerous. Such was 'my' Occupation.¹⁷⁵

Professional work or a career appear among the ordinary Occupation-time experiences of many somewhat older Interviewees of this group:

I decided I would work, and study in the evening, that is, at night school. And that's what I did. I started working for an electro-technical company, Stanislaw Michnowski, located at 2 Aleja-3-Maja Ave., well, to coin a phrase: as a probationer. But the situation was that, since I was just under fourteen, so the owner of the company could not get me registered

175 From the account of Janusz Domański, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_074 (recorded by Dorota Pazio).

as a probationer, for such were the regulations, apparently. Therefore, he had me registered as an errand boy. Nonetheless, I worked at regular building sites together with installers, so to say: learning the profession. All that became possible, I have to admit, thanks to my uncle who had a carpenter's shop in Zielna St. and knew Mr Michnowski, as he had made the so-called store outfit for him, meaning all the furnishings, desks, shelves, and so on, as needed for the store.¹⁷⁶

Many these stories of Warsaw childhood experiences that preceded the Uprising have the war or, more precisely, the Occupation, present in them between the lines. At just a few moments of focused zoom-ins can we deem that 'wartime' memories appear. One such close-up concerns the very beginning of the war – the September 1939 campaign: the bombings, conflagrations, ravages, and temporary desertion of the city:

In 1939, my father, as a Government official, was evacuated together with the whole Ministry, the files and everything, by a special train, but he could not take any of us with him. My mother, together with a neighbour who had twins, from the same house in Puławska St., somehow managed to arrange this. Her husband was, sort of, more energetic, [he arranged for] a 'RUCH' [press distribution enterprise] vehicle which distributed the press, and as early as on 2nd September, following the first German air raids on Warsaw, he stuck us onto those papers, with the small bundles, me, my mum, and his wife with those small twins. We drove along the Lublin hardtop toward Żelechów. ...

He [i.e. my father] somehow managed to reach Żelechów. He came across us there, so we had our father, the whole family, the only son, mum. You had to think, because the war was over then. Warsaw had capitulated.¹⁷⁷

Symptomatically, it is in not just a few stories that only this period named 'the war':

Once the war was over, I began going to school again. We studied for two hours a day. That was, primarily, mathematics, Polish and, well, German, from time to time.¹⁷⁸

My mother lived in Wronia Street, I went there and, till the end of the war, // obviously, till the armistice and seizure of the city by the Germans, I stayed there. The siege of Warsaw – it was a tragedy for all, not just for us. After the armistice, with the Germans having entered Warsaw, I went to my aunt, to Dzielna St. There we stayed, and there we lived with our grandma for some time.¹⁷⁹

176 From the account of Michał Fertak, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_029 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

177 From the account of Waclaw Wilk-Wilczyński, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_035 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb).

178 From the account of Stefan Sot, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_159 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb).

179 From the account of Waldemar Pański, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_153 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb).

The next period identified in these accounts as related to the war is, usually, the Warsaw Uprising. Paradoxically, it is true also for those, fairly numerous, anecdotes that tell us about the narrators' own involvement in the conspiracy – as if it was something beside the 'true war'.

The question can obviously be posed, also as a reproach, as to whether such stories are real and true and, moreover, representative or typical. In reply, I may remind the reader once again that my focus is not the issue of the genuineness or veracity of the stories under analysis, the correspondence between what the Interviewees say and 'what it was like in reality'. I am mostly interested, instead, in individual experiences and their subjective meanings, the interpretations given to them by the Interviewees, and the ways in which they have built their autobiographical narratives upon these experiences, combining the episodes into sequences, stages, phases of their biographies, and setting or contrasting one thing against another. This opposition/contrast between the pre-camp and camp-time experience is the reason for why the former appears so ordinary.

In analysing the Occupation-time autobiographies set in Warsaw, it would be worthwhile asking whether any images of Jews, the Ghetto or the Holocaust appear in them, and what sort of images these are. The first observation one finds feasible in this context is that such close-ups do appear – usually, not in the first part of the interview, the free narrating phase, but only in response to the interviewer's questions. If not for these questions, most of our Varsovian Interviewees would have constructed their stories without taking into account even one of their over four hundred thousand Jewish neighbours – residents of the Ghetto. This enclosed district is almost non-existent in the spontaneous stories. Yet, there are vital exceptions; let us quote an exemplary fragment, on a friendship that was sustained in spite of the wall that separated the two universes:

I entered, because I had some Jews I was well acquainted with, friends, then later I entered the Ghetto area in an illegal way. I mean, I entered the Courts edifice, there, from Elektoralna St. I would take off my overcoat, leave it at the cloakroom, as proof that I'd be back there in a moment; I took out in that cloakroom, secretly, or in the restroom, an armband with the Star [of David]. I would put it on my arm, and use the second exit, which led to the Ghetto side, I exited as a Jew. Of course, I could've run the risk, had my identity papers been checked, but I took precautions not to expose myself to consequences, and I went to my acquaintances. We'd have a chat, and in the morning, once the night was over, during which you were not supposed to walk around, I would go out and then, not along the same way, but through the exit gate toward Elektoralna St., // I can't remember what the street between Elektoralna St. and the Courts is named... That side street. There was a fence made of thick beams. One of the beams was half-opened, and you had to wait for some time, till the guard walked past, then you set the beam ajar, and you walked out. I thus was twice in the Ghetto, illegally. It was really a tragedy then [there] already.¹⁸⁰

180 From the account of Zbigniew Dłubak, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_156.

This is a unique image, (re)constructed spontaneously, as part of an unrestrained narration, by an intellectual, a known photographic artist today, then involved in an armed conspiracy with the People's Army (Armia Ludowa). The accounts of younger Varsovians, with whom we most frequently talked with, offer in most cases completely different images of/from the enclosed district and of its dwellers. Their common aspect is their great distance from the world behind the wall. It appears as a separate planet, completely dissimilar to 'our city'. Its residents are also unlike 'us'. They appear just for a while, in a vestigial fashion, if at all. They cannot catch the narrators' attention for too long. Sometimes, they just slip past in the background, a feature in the city's topography. Like the walls surrounding the Ghetto, whose contour is outlined by some of them with much precision:

And it so happened, sir, that the Ghetto... // They erased that house of ours. We swapped the house with some Jews, into a large apartment in Ogrodowa Street, that took a week, well, and the municipal board again claimed the house, and we ... were thrown out, and we got back to that one [= our previous dwelling]. That was, well, at 92 Nowolipki St.

Well, and, you know, it lasted then until November '41, and once they set the walls along the streets, that is, there was Bankowy Square somewhere there, along Elektoralna St., Chłodna St., they turned into Żelazna St., incidentally. ... But, that ghetto was [set] along Żelazna St., up to, roughly, Prosta St. The wall headed backwards, there was that famous [wooden pedestrian] bridge over Chłodna St., and in Krochmalna the ghetto followed up, at the Waliców St. side.¹⁸¹

The Ghetto is a space (physical as well as social or human) that appears unattainable, unknown, inanimate, alien in the individual maps of the city as recorded in the memory of Interviewees; invisible and unrealised on an everyday basis. It only appears within the frame of memory when it marks its presence by itself, demanding attention – eliciting sounds unheard before and wisps of smoke unseen before. One could not possibly neglect or overlook them any longer:

Because, as the Ghetto was liquidated, then, then there was a yell, kind of. The moment the Ghetto began to be liquidated, I remember, the window was open and some kind of uncanny yell was coming in, so, // so when we woke up, then you wouldn't tell that something... Are there some geese squealing, in some farm? Only afterwards, after a short time, did we learn that they're liquidating the Ghetto, that there were the Jews, the Jews were screaming, that sound... // Sound is a word that's unfitting here, // that piercing yell, incredible, // that was just the... // that was coming from the Ghetto being liquidated.¹⁸²

181 From the account of Henryk Nowicki, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_018.

182 From the account of Janusz Bąkowski, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_154.

The audio recording shows how strong and dramatic this reminiscence is. The author was brought up before the war in poor Polish-Jewish backyards. Many of his former friends must have remained behind that wall, somewhere in that place where those frightful sounds were coming from.

There are some who speak openly of their increasingly distant, but once close, acquaintances or friends:

There were two Jewish families living in my house, in Zakroczyńska St. A clockmaker, // I had my fellows, as there were three boys there: Heniek, the oldest; and then, Abram, the younger one, and Moniek, the youngest; and there was Andzia, Hana. We called her Andzia. He was a clockmaker, and he had a shop and a flat on the street side. There was a shop right next to it, but with an entrance from our backyard. It was a mercer's shop, you know, that's what it was called. And it was that very Jewish family who ran that mercer's shop. And as they were leaving for the Ghetto, then some of the things, those fabrics, lay in my apartment, sorted out under the bed. She [apparently, the merchant's wife (Transl. note)] requested my mother, maybe someone else too, to keep it for some time there. Because afterwards they were coming, // taking this stuff and, apparently, selling it. For some time.¹⁸³

Those who never had such fellows, or have managed to forget about them, evoke the occurrences behind the wall in a quieter way, without emotion. They mention these events, let us recall, not of their own initiative but on the request of the interviewer:

[TG:] Do you remember the uprising in the Ghetto? [SS:] I do, but I wasn't extremely interested. When I was at my friend's in Pawia St., then I could see them burning, // the ghetto burning.¹⁸⁴

Sometimes, however, it was impossible not to be interested – as when a shrapnel from the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was flying over the wall, hitting the 'safe' side of it, and increasing the workload. Let us take a look at a fragment from the reminiscences of an Interviewee who happened to work at that time in the immediate vicinity of the Ghetto:

And I, sir, walk on Wednesday, the 19th [of April 1943 – PF's note], to the [? tram] stop, as I went to work at 8 [in the morning] in Tamka St. ... I went to work, and in the afternoon, as we learned about it then, while at work, that it was an uprising. ... I, obviously... // The trams were only arriving at Krasińskich Square, and returned. They didn't even come [as far as that] afterwards. They started immediately, organised transport facilities, // people had the skill of getting organised

183 From the account of Jan Ryszard Sempka, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_036.

184 From the account of Stefan Sot, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_159 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb).

quickly, // horse-drawn transport, and they carried the people to Żoliborz [district] along Długa, Freta, Zakroczymska, Krajewskiego Street[s]. Yes, and there, the fighting was going on, as the gunfighting was from both sides. I witnessed that, since I arrived at Krasińskich Square and walked down the street, to Winiarska St., for that for me was the shortest distance to Franciszkańska St. I saw a policeman with blood stains inside a gate, he had his thigh shot through. Probably somewhere from that side over there. Whereas between the buildings, as there were two, such, buildings standing, edgeways, on the Ghetto side, there was a man slung across one of those balconies. This means that they had probably shot, killed him on that balcony, sir. And that was on Wednesday. It lasted all the time. The biggest for us, // I mean, for me personally, that was, like, the heaviest night, Easter Saturday into Easter Sunday. Why? Because the Ghetto was on fire already, it was seriously on fire, since the Germans were setting it on fire. Although Zakroczymska St. is some sort of a section, but it was windy, it was moreover warm, and there were whole, like, burning, glowing paper sheets, or whatever it was. And we watched so it wouldn't get enflamed on the roof, as there was spread, on the roof, tar was spread on the roofing felt. So, we sat on the roof, and looked after, for it not to... // And that was Saturday, Easter Saturday, into Easter Sunday. That was a very heavy night for us, because the Ghetto was burning at that time. Well, besides, I witnessed that in Świętojerska Street ... but that was later on, the uprising in the Ghetto was falling down, or had fallen down already, I could see a man, there was a sewage manhole, [at the corner of] Bonifraterska/Swiętojerska Sts., and there was a manhole, and that manhole [cover] was lifted up, and from that manhole a man came out and tried to escape, and they began shooting at that man. And he ran into a gate, and there he was reportedly killed. So, I witnessed that. [PF:] Did you work all the time [during the Ghetto Uprising]? [JRS:] Well, yes, I worked all the time, activity in Warsaw didn't come to a standstill.¹⁸⁵

The last sentence spoken by this Interviewee renders well the experiences of probably all our Warsaw Interviewees who stayed in the city during the Ghetto Uprising; it is their common denominator. Regardless of how far the occurrences behind the wall reached or affected them (if at all), here, 'on our side', life goes on, with its usual rhythm. Activity does not come to a standstill. What is more, it is hard to even talk about 'our' and 'that (other)' side, as 'that' side is virtually non-existent. The Warsaw experienced and remembered by these narrators does not extend to the enclosed district and the people contained therein. Rather than being an objection, this observation simply attempts to recognise the prevalent traits of the collective memory of this generation of Varsovians. Such marginalisation is, unfortunately, observable also on the level of a more objectivised historical narrative on the occupied city:

185 From the account of Jan Ryszard Sempka, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_036.

There was the Uprising in the Ghetto. I don't consider it an uprising; it was a spurt. Today, they call everything an uprising. There were no military men, there were the civilians only. It was a spurt by a group of people. ... There was no organisation in the Ghetto, to my mind; there was the ŻOB [i.e. Jewish Combat Organisation], but that did not quite play a significant role. [Mordechaj] Anielewicz was no military man, nor was [Marek] Edelman a military man, these were people from the spurt. In our [i.e. Warsaw] Uprising, there were five generals, military men, and there were the entire military resources, there were tactics.¹⁸⁶

Let us pause, now, at this point to consider the experience of 'our' uprising – the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 – and its biographical consequences. This particular Uprising is not something that is only to be inquired about: it is a constitutive element of each of these stories, one that is evoked at a crucial moment. It forms the biography's turning point, setting the beginning of the biographical trajectory or one of its subsequent stages, incomparable with any of the preceding ones. Again, this generalisation concerns, to the greatest degree, the youngest of our Interviewees. How deeply they were involved in Uprising-related fighting – or, whether they were so involved at all – is not quite the point. The statement can even be risked that an additional burden appears when there was no such involvement. Not because this has created a sense of guilt but because a substantial element is missing, which could have otherwise been instrumental in giving a meaning to the subsequent experience. Without such a meaning, it proves much harder to cope with the trauma of *Lager* trajectories, the sudden biographical cave-in that started with the Uprising – or was simply triggered by it, as believed by many of our Interviewees. Hence, voices such as those quoted below are by no means isolated:

You know, I, // I condemn the Uprising, I condemn the Uprising. They shouldn't have been the ones to begin [it], they really shouldn't have to have done it. With nothing, sir, well, consider the [squad of] thirteen boys having a *sidolówka*^{187,188}

The fact is, // I lost a lot of my family in the Uprising: an uncle, a brother; sadly, he took part in the Uprising, and perished. ... Then, I ponder every now and then whether this Uprising has paid back, although it was a heroic spurt. Whether it has paid back, or we have borne more of a loss than [gained] a benefit. What of it that the news was disseminated to the world that an uprising broke out, once most of those people were murdered, all was destroyed?¹⁸⁹

186 From the account of Waldemar Pański, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_153 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb).

187 Common name of the 'R wz. 42' hand grenade produced by the Home Army during WW2 (Transl. note).

188 From the account of Henryk Nowicki, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_018.

189 From the account of Ryszard Cyran, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_097.

And, just one more opinion, the most unambiguous of all:

What I always tell my daughter is, if anything similar happens, such as an uprising, for instance, then, don't you wait for the course of events to happen but just take the things you need the most, and get out of town.¹⁹⁰

A definite majority of our Interviewees from this Warsaw group were somehow involved or engaged in the Uprising: as scouts, messengers, or ancillaries. Those roles were short-lived and transient. The narratives of those experiences are chaotic, shredded, and incoherent. It is difficult – if at all possible – to build a precise historical narrative upon them. These are stories of lost children, rather than accounts of soldiers bearing any military rank and executing their commanders' orders, able to prove knowledgeable of the situation.¹⁹¹ There are some who barely brushed up against the Uprising, or who just watched it from the other side of the Vistula. Some wanted to get involved but could not – because, for instance, their parents forbade them:

I was not in the organisation, since my father absolutely would not let me, which hurt me very much. I remember going to my female first cousin in Daleka Street, where the AK-men [i.e. Home Army members] met. My female first cousin was also a member of the Home Army, but I was not supposed to be so. ...

When the rising broke out in Praga, ... I wanted to go straight off, volunteer. I was seventeen, an athletic boy, I swam, played volleyball. My father could see that this was not a joking matter with me anymore, but said, 'Let us wait a little still, a few hours; we will not be late.' A few hours later, there was nothing to turn up [to], for there was no uprising in Praga [anymore].¹⁹²

These experiences of the Uprising are diverse, scattered; the Interviewee's vicissitudes run along various paths, but all these paths, completely unexpectedly, converge at one place: the transit camp of Pruszków. It all happens so quickly; they experience it in a crowd, with great fear, and find it shocking. This may be the reason why their memory has only preserved strands of it, torn images: some SS-men; sometimes, St. Adalbert's (św. Wojciecha) church in Wola district; the Warsaw West Railway Station (Dworzec Zachodni); an electric train; some snapshot from the Pruszków transit camp – at a large yard near the railway tracks, followed, moments later, by the transport to a concentration camp: either to Auschwitz, or, directly, to Mauthausen.

190 From the account of Henryk Matulko, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_129 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb).

191 Yet, there are some stories of this kind; see, for example, the accounts of Waclaw Wilk-Wilczyński, MSDP_035, and Jan Ryszard Sempka, MSDP_036. The latter is probably the only one of the several dozen of our Warsaw Interviewees whose account has also been taped by the Oral History Archive of the Warsaw Rising Museum (available at the Museum's official website, www.1944.pl).

192 From the account of Janusz Domański, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_074 (recorded by Dorota Pazio).

There was a sentinel, the SS-men were standing, somewhere there at the corner, we had to walk up a bit to that barricade which they had already taken away. There, the search at once, 'hands up!' They immediately took off various things, searched us, and let us go on. There was a whole column walking toward Wola, there was a point, like, at St. Adalbert's church. They gathered us up there, and we were there for two or three days, encamped in that church. Later, when they gathered all the company together, they convoyed us to the [Warsaw] West station and to Pruszków.¹⁹³

Some of these barely noted incidents, residuary images, have a special status as they rank among the most important the memory has stored and constantly replays. They are key for the Interviewee's identity. Usually, these are the most traumatic images:

We were driven through the Polish Fiat [establishment] area – initially, all of us to the '[Romuald] Traugutt' Park. There, we were separated. Males separately and women separately. And we were driven to Stawki St. There, in Stawki St., were the warehouses and there I met my mother for the last time, I didn't know it then that it was for the last time, but it so happened that a column of women was standing and a column of men entered, and our column turned up beside the other column... // And my mum, I remember she gave me some more... // In the kettle, she had some water, I don't know where from, as there was no water available at that time, after all; maybe that was some rainwater. And some sugar cubes. // I met her there, and bid farewell, actually, to my mother, because our column was driven forward, the men were driven forth in the first column, and when I said goodbye to my mum at the last moment... // with my sisters [the Interviewee's mother was accompanied by his two sisters (PF's note)], and we were driven to the church in Wola.¹⁹⁴

The passage from the occupied city, from the Uprising, to a camp marks the moment from which the narrators enter – are thrown into – the swift current of a collective lot, a current that snatches and carries them forth. Each of these individuals also experiences, moreover, their individual trajectory, which proves to be irresistible. Within a few months, most of the narrators find themselves detained in a number of camps, working with several labour *Kommandos* – the usual initial site being a quarry; as their health abruptly breaks down, they are put, in most cases, in a sickroom (*rewir*), and finally are driven along a death march, for dozens of kilometres.

The prisoners who arrive in the *kacets* early in the spring of 1944 are usually offered no opportunity to adapt to the camp universe: the timeline is too short for them gradually to be taught the rudiments of the role of inmate, for their lengthy apprenticeship, the development of interpersonal bonds and social relationships.

193 From the account of Henryk Matulka, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_129 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb).

194 From the account of Jan Ryszard Sempka, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_036.

Those who could be saved, in the first place, managed for a while to draw the attention of the senior and well-domesticated prisoners, whenever the latter were able to extend their helping hand. They are normally perfectly aware of these facts, and some can express them quite accurately:

It is worth saying here that all of us, the young, I was seventeen then, but all the young boys from the Uprising who were carried to our camp in our transport, all of them survived. All found some ‘camp fathers’ [for themselves] who took care of them. Be it the crematorium *Kapo*, or be it the *Feuerwache Kapo*, or be it the kitchen chefs’ *Kapo* – everyone had a ‘father’ to help him. Of course, our caretakers were mostly Polish. All of us young men survived the camp. Whereas the Varsovians were passing away at an incredible rate, countless, you can say; already in the winter, early spring period, they were departing from this life, so greatly, especially that the mortality rate... The food rations had been cut sometime in around April. The prisoners only got a sixth of a loaf of bread each. Even the word ‘bread’ is, besides, too magniloquent, I would say. It was some sort of a mash, hell knows of what. And they would get a bowl of soup made of potato peelings, with some weeds, once a day. So, the people were greatly passing away as a result. We, the young, had extra soup, and an extra piece of bread. This was a great deal. Thanks to this, we survived.¹⁹⁵

Nevertheless, some of our Interviewees appear to have remained on their own till the very end, unable or not lucky enough to find a ‘father’ patron for themselves;¹⁹⁶ some lost their ‘father’ along the way (from camp to camp/*Kommando* to *Kommando*). They lived to greet the liberation while on the verge of complete exhaustion – to the extent that some of them did not even register the moment of liberation.

Although I didn’t quite realise I was still alive [after the liberation – PF’s note]. I had complete amnesia, and even some time after the liberation I didn’t know how to write. Later on, when I could write again, I found my handwriting had changed. I gradually retrieved my memory, to the point where I could remember everything.

Elsewhere, this narrator says:

I was absent physically and spiritually then. They say, I existed. Something reached my consciousness, some cries: ‘The Americans, the Americans have arrived!’ But I couldn’t care less about all that: Americans, or whoever, whatever.¹⁹⁷

195 From the account of Janusz Domański, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_074.

196 For more on this particular thread, see the following sections of this study: remarks appended to the analysis of the account of the survivor Roman Strój.

197 From the account of Waław Wilk-Wilczyński, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_035 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb).

Over the entire period of their detention in the *Lager*, they constantly brushed against death. Not just an anonymous death, the piles of nameless corpses which in that final period filled many spaces of the camp area – but also a concrete death: the death of those with whom they travelled to the camp. Their closest relatives were sometimes among these companions. It appears these are the severest camp-related experiences. In order to elicit a related reminiscence, let us set together a few passages from various moments within a single story; with their different narrative functions, these fragments revolve around one motif: the death of a father and two brothers in the camp.

It might have been a mistake that we made, with our whole family, by sticking together. That was the cardinal mistake, it seems to me. Clearly, they separated the women from us, and all four of us, that is, my father and three brothers, went to the camp of Mauthausen. Whereas my mum, with the other women, was directed to Ravensbrück. So, this meant the whole of our family ended up in a camp...

My middle brother and I were both in one *Kommando*. We somehow stuck together, but it was made increasingly plain that it wouldn't be possible this way all the time. I abated first. ... My elder brother was well-built, and a, sort of, sportsman, a little. I find it strange that he was the second to lose his life. I think this must've happened in an abrupt way, and it wasn't [because of] an illness. Because he even worked with those carpenters, and they were Austrians, from freedom [i.e. living outside the camp]. And he even told us sometimes that he'd got a piece of bread from them. But they feared they might expose themselves to the SS-men's displeasure. A horde of SS-men was swarming around there constantly, and the *Kapo* exacerbated all this by screaming and lashing when he saw them. So I wonder at the fact that he ended his life before my middle brother did, who was always a skinny man and who Mum considered to be, like, her 'scamp of a son'. Although he was the middle one, and I was the youngest, Mum always considered Zdzisiek [dimin., Zdzisław], this very one, to be her, sort of, 'scamp of a son'. ... I was weaker, and Zdzich [dimin., Zdzisław] would always support me psychically...

My father always said, 'You have to stick together, last out till the end. For someone to survive, to at least let mother know; for one of you to support her'...

My father felt very bad. He was depressed, to put it simply. He knew he wouldn't bear it, and that his days were numbered. He was a sickly man, after all; already under the Occupation, he had problems with his stomach. And, that camp-style belly-timber... He was, moreover, a smoking addict. And, my brother and I noticed that he wouldn't eat the whole [portion of] bread, but sell [part of it] for a cigarette. And he was sinking fast. We made efforts to explain this to him, but couldn't quite convince him...

I collapsed myself when I learned that my father and brothers were dead. That was a collapse. // I couldn't comprehend how three people could perish so quickly...

There was weeping, nothing else. What could one [do]? The worse thing was that I couldn't share this with any family or friends. I had to work through all that tragedy myself and bear it on my own. ... There was no friendly person in this block. Everybody was scowling at one another, for there was hunger. I didn't make friends with anyone.

And, a reminiscence from the post-war period, with respect to the same trauma:

I knew [about my father's and brothers' deaths in the camp – PF's note], but just couldn't look into my Mum's eyes and tell her they were dead. I gave her some hope. And we reported them to the Red Cross, so they could search and notify us how things stand. And, some time after, we received, like, brief notifications that they stayed [in the camp], died, // with the dates. ... I never eventually told her that I'd known. She was under the delusion that perhaps I had left the camp too soon; that maybe we could've met there. In the following years, we did not resume the subject, treating the camp matters, the matter of their deaths, as a taboo. We didn't comment on that any further, for we were so sorry about that. ... Mum was terribly upset, she remained sad till the end. She was greatly affected, but, how could I help her with it? I comforted her by saying that we have to finally snap out of it, and carry on living this life.¹⁹⁸

The return to Poland – for those who decided to go back, as many from this group resolved to stay in the West – meant for this group of survivors a return to a city in ruins, to decimated families. The few months between the summer of 1944 and spring of 1945 deeply and abidingly mutilated their lives. Their biographical mutilations were no less heavy than those caused by the *Lager* in the lives of the older, long-term prisoners. To survive the last few months in the camp could have been no less tough, if not downright tougher, than to survive several years there.¹⁹⁹ This finding is not absurd or illogical if we apply qualitative, rather than quantitative, 'measures': it appears more appropriate to apply the former to human experiences of the kind in question.

At this point, I will refrain from rendering more condense the description of the third (and last) category of camp narrative/experience I have discerned. I will follow up this thread in my analysis of the account of Roman Strój, later in this study. This chapter is more descriptive than the analyses of the two other interviews. The following chapter, in turn, considers the specificity of women's *Lager*-related narratives – specifically, those which have been taped in Poland as part of the project under discussion.

198 From the account of Henryk Matulko, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_129 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb).

199 Of the many interviews I have recorded during the past few years with former concentration camp prisoners, only once was the session radically and forcefully cut off by the interviewee, who nearly threw me out of his apartment. The possible explanation is that my presence triggered in him some unprocessed traumatic memories. The reminiscences were of the type combining Warsaw and concentration camp motifs. The thirty-minute recording made on that occasion has not been included in the MSDP project and is not available.

4 Excursus: Mauthausen in female narratives

Mauthausen was a male camp. As opposed to Ravensbrück, Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen, no separate camp for female inmates functioned within the main camp structure until the 15th of September 1944. This is not to say that there were no women kept in Mauthausen before this date. As meticulously recorded by historians of this Nazi concentration camp, the first four Slovenian women arrived at Mauthausen in the spring of 1942 – just to be executed by firing squad on the 20th of April, which was Hitler’s birthday, together with forty-six male prisoners. The said birthday has left a lasting impression in the memory of inmates, male and female alike, of many concentration camps.

A few months later, ten women were transported to Mauthausen from Ravensbrück, and assigned a labour with the camp’s newly established brothel – the ‘*puff*’ – to use the camp language. This institution was set up by way of Himmler’s decision, with a view to solve or at least diminish the problem of homosexuality within the camp. The *puff* tends to be mentioned by the male inmates of Mauthausen that we talked to, although it appears, as a rule, as part of a reply to the interviewer’s question(s). The *puff* is, namely, one of the less-popular fragments of camp recollections, not to be heard of by just anyone. Once it appears, the *puff* is in most cases a place where the others would go – inaccessible for the narrator. The speaker’s own visits there are sporadically evoked – and any such visit would be made contrary to the venue’s designed core purpose, in a way that discloses its other specific functions. The following is an excerpt concerning the camp’s underlife:

Man, there was one Polish woman there, I recall. Yes, those were such women prisoners too, who were cheated by the Germans // that ‘you’ll go out to freedom, but you must stay there for some number of days, there’. And those poor wenches, as they wanted to come out to freedom, went to that *puff*. Well, I, // as I approached her, it was a small Polish girl, I can remember. // So what’d you do? // The day came, [and] you had to go there, you got your card // and you had to go into there. As I went there, then I got some cigarettes. For what I said was, ‘I’m not turning up here to knock it off – sorry for the word – but you just give me my five cigarettes, and I’m off.’ You know what, you would ever think of such things? Oh dear me.²⁰⁰

The *puff* attracted attention – also by way of contrast, as something non-adhering to the camp universe, even though the contrast was anything but apparent. It is,

200 From the account of Sylwin Józwiak, available at the Oral History Archive, the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House, Warsaw; ref. no. MSDP_027.

in fact, one of the many chapters in the story of women in Mauthausen, and perhaps the shortest one. Yet, it is hopefully not the least important aspect – also because it has been neglected over the years by the camp’s historians, instead only mentioned in footnotes or appearing through some suggestive (or ambiguous) quotations from the inmates’ memories. The image of women working, or coerced to do the work, in the *puff*, as constructed in these memories, is usually bound with negative emotions. An understanding of, and empathy for, this variety of the camp lot appears deficient in them.²⁰¹

In the autumn of 1942, a group of 135 women arrived from the occupied Czech lands to the Mauthausen camp; two were put before a firing squad and the others killed in a gas chamber. Over the following two years, until August 1944, women were transported into the camp in order to be executed or kept there temporarily, and then dispatched forward, to some other camp. A dedicated numbering was introduced for those women as from the 15th August the *Frauenkonzentrationslager Mauthausen* (F-KLM) was instituted. A few barracks were assigned for this purpose. Some female inmates were sent, however, to various subcamps where they were supposed to perform a variety of work, such as in weaponry factories.

Autumn of 1944 marked the beginning of arrivals of thousands of women to Mauthausen, brought in with evacuation transports from other camps: the largest such batch, of some three thousand, came in the winter of 1945 from Gross-Rosen, and was forwarded to Bergen-Belsen. March 1945 saw some two thousand women brought from Ravensbrück. A transport similar in size set forth from Flossenbürg, but less than two hundred people actually reached Mauthausen – the others were killed on the way. The estimated number of registered female inmates at Mauthausen is around four thousand – this is based on data retrievable with documents and preserved camp files; many more might have been through the camp without leaving such traces.

Polish women also turned up in Mauthausen in 1944, still before the dedicated female camp was set up. Some of them would be accompanied by their children (while some were still children themselves) and by men deported from Warsaw, through the Pruszków transit camp, during the Warsaw Uprising. The males were given Mauthausen numbers, and taken to the camp. The women were kept at the so-called *Zeltlager* – a makeshift tent camp where extremely awful conditions prevailed, even as compared to the ordinary camp barracks. The women from the Warsaw transport were sent a few weeks later to take on various forced-labour tasks across Austria. Although the inmates were registered, the exact number of

201 Cf. A Baumgartner, *Die vergessenen Frauen von Mauthausen. Die weiblichen Häftlinge des Konzentrationslager Mauthausen und ihre Geschichte*, Wien 1997, p. 93 ff. I have based the present historical background on this important study by Baumgartner, being the only monograph on women in Mauthausen, issued – furnished with a clearly apt title – over fifty years after the camp was liberated, now that historical studies on Mauthausen have filled up numerous library shelves.

those arriving from Warsaw has not been determined to date. An approximation can only be given, whereby four hundred to seven hundred women arriving during the Warsaw Uprising stayed in Mauthausen. This is according to what historians have concluded; a similar number is indicated by a Polish female prisoner from that particular transport:

Of those women were plenty, I should think, five hundred definitely, or there were more of them maybe, weren't they. 'Cause there was, I think, well, thirty persons each, // well, I don't know, // maybe seven of those wagons. For I know it was a long train. A long train, that one. ... A thousand, perhaps? Well, // but there was quite a lot of that, a lot of women there was.²⁰²

* * *

One of the purposes behind the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project (MSDP) was to record the accounts of women – female testimonies. The project leaders resolved to make recordings of more such reports than the structure of the prisoner community would suggest, with females accounting for less than 5 percent of the total number of inmates.²⁰³ Representativeness, the intent to maintain a proportion corresponding to the camp's reality, was generally an important assumption of the project, but in this particular case (as with the Jewish inmates) the decision was made in order to upset this proportion. Otherwise, the voices of camp minorities would not sound and resound properly, deafened by the voices of the majority, resembling one another: those of political, and male, prisoners. For those who delivered the project, it was clear that what was statistically representative might very easily predominate and conceal what was peculiar and untypical about the camp experience.²⁰⁴ A 'quantitative' correctness and meticulousness may also lead to a 'qualitative' falsification. Hence, finally, with some 850 interviews recorded as part of the project, as many as ninety-six were conducted with women. I am pointing out this aspect also in order to show how important methodological issues are to oral history projects.

This overrepresentation is also true, and to a larger extent, for the video interviews recorded within MSDP and, consequently, for a new display due to be prepared for the Mauthausen Memorial Site once the project is completed. Extensive thirty or forty minute fragments of twenty video interviews with former prisoners of both sexes, and of various nationalities, have been made use of within

202 From the account of Alina Krajewska, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_002 (as recorded by Agnieszka Knyt).

203 A. Baumgartner, op. cit., p. 219 ff.

204 G. Botz, B. Halbmayr, H. Amesberger, "Zeitzeugen- und Zeitzeuginnenprojekt Mauthausen". Genese, Projektstruktur und erste Ergebnisse, in C. Schindler (ed.), *Jahrbuch des Dokumentationsarchivs des österreichischen Widerstandes*, Münster 2004, p. 40 ff.

the said display; there are three female accounts. The footage is also available at the Mauthausen Memorial Site website (www.mauthausen-memorial.at)²⁰⁵.

The Polish section of the project has made recordings of a total of 164 interviews with Mauthausen survivors – a mere three of which were with females. To find those three women and to get their consent for a conversation called for a remarkable effort on our part – much bigger than successfully getting in touch with male interviewees. The camp stories told by these women did not quite ‘fit’ those of the male prisoners, which was also the way these women subjectively sensed it. These stories, so to speak, are believed to be not dramatic enough, which is not a favourable circumstance with respects to involvement with the former inmates’ milieu. The women remain in a rather loose relationship with their male counterparts – and are incapable themselves of forming a separate female milieu, in contrast to, for example, the former female inmates of Ravensbrück. Or, more precisely, they *used to be* incapable, as there are but a few women from those Warsaw transports still alive today. The several weeks stay at the tent camp by the wall of Mauthausen has proven insufficient for building a separate group of Nazi concentration camp inmates who could be recognised as a milieu. What this meant was that the memory of camp experiences those women prisoners kept with them had no social space to be tended to, sustained, and solidified; only a private space remained. In the course of one female interview, in the presence of the husband of the interviewee being recorded, the following dialogue appeared in relation to her formally joining the former prisoners’ milieu:

[Interviewee’s husband:] We can tell you that, as Alina has completed her [application] sheet to join the, // the organisation of people who were there at Mauthausen, it was not with joy that they received that sheet of hers. There’s probably no woman belonging to that organisation. // [AK:] No. // Yes, I am probably the first one. // [Husband:] OK then, then, // and the secretary told her, I think, it was: “I don’t know if this can be settled.” Yeah, but this has come over in the meantime.²⁰⁶

Another of the interviewed women at one point mentions a (dis)integrated milieu of former female inmates:

All that got somehow dispersed somewhere later on.²⁰⁷

While to build a generalisation upon a single occurrence would clearly miss the point, such a fact can at least be noted – and I believe that it is worthwhile indeed, given the context. The thing is that one of the three former Mauthausen inmates,

205 These include fragments of video interviews with Anna Bergman (UK), Ewa Lukacs (Israel) and Maria Catherina van Bueren (Netherlands).

206 From the account of Alina Krajewska, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_002 (recorded by Agnieszka Knytl).

207 From the account of Irena Norwa, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_033 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

whose interview we have recorded, had come forward after she listened to a Polish Radio broadcast featuring the KARTA Centre principal telling a story of our documentary project and inviting former prisoners to participate. Characteristically, this was most likely the only such case: given the Polish circumstances, one does not need a radio advertisement to meet Nazi concentration camp inmates, as there are simpler and more efficient ways to do so. This shows that the title of Baumgartner's book – *The Forgotten Women of Mauthausen* – encompasses the Polish female inmates as well. The lady, who called us following the radio broadcast said the following about her (non-)participation in the commemoration rituals that were so important to this group of prisoners – their annual trips ('peregrinations', as they themselves tend to call them):

As to the camp, in turn, I have never had an opportunity to visit it. And till this day haven't I had one. 'Cause I've never been there for a second time, though I should really be willing to. And I wouldn't take umbrage at all, I have to say. Even now that I'm telling you this, crooked [*laughs*] and lame as I am. I wouldn't take umbrage if Linz authorities invited me one day. There weren't really any children there. I don't know if I was the only one in the whole town. And the authorities would, well, not go so poor, I think, to have me invited for a period of a week, be it a week, so that I could see the town for myself. The beautiful, magnificent town of Linz, it is after all. I have never experienced it, that anyone // ever invited me, be it for a week. No, this is what hasn't happened.²⁰⁸

* * *

The three narrations of women recorded as part of the Polish chapter of MSDP are distinct by more than the mere fact that they form a record of a forgotten, if not completely unknown, historical experience – or, more specifically, autobiographical memory. What is even more, in my opinion, is the female aspect or colour of these stories, and it is this particular aspect that I would like to focus on now, leaving the facts behind these testimonies somewhat aside.

I have purposefully included the female excursus in my analysis right after I embark on approaching the third type of Mauthausen survivor's autobiographical narrative that I herein discern. Each of the women whose accounts we recorded were dispatched to the camp within the Warsaw transport of August 1944 – that is, during the Uprising and in relation to this, as part of an "evacuation" of civilians through the transitory camp in Pruszków near Warsaw. Our interviewees' age is comparable to the Warsaw male colleagues that we recorded, and although they stayed in Mauthausen for a mere few weeks, and were then sent off to do forced labour in Braunau, Steyr, or Linz, their biographical trajectories appear to be similar to those of the men from the Warsaw transports that we talked to.

208 From the account of Irena Rowińska, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_165 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

The experiences of the several months between the summer of 1944 and the spring of 1945 are (re)constructed in these stories as radical trajectories that the speakers themselves are not able and have no chance to oppose. They form a biographical rupture which tears up the continuity of experience, breaking the life history into two non-matching parts. Applicable to these experiences are a number of further detailed recognitions that I made earlier, describing a profile of the 'Warsaw' accounts. This would also be true for remarks made when it came to constructing the other two types of camp narratives, for this reason I have included interviews with Polish female prisoners who spent several years at Ravensbrück and with those who were imprisoned there at a later date for conspiracy, usually having been through a detention, prison, or another camp(s) beforehand.²⁰⁹ This, however, would require a different study – one probably worth writing in the future. Here however, for a number of reasons, my objective is to focus on surviving Mauthausen inmates of both sexes.

What about the aforementioned 'female aspect' in the biographical experience, if the third type of survivor narrative apparently includes these reports? Within the interviews under analysis, I can recognise two dimensions of relevant differences, both associated with the gender/sex aspect: gender-related – that is, culture-laden, and sex-related, i.e. biologically conditioned. Albeit both are overlapping and penetrate each other across the narrations analysed, I will nonetheless try and identify a few moments characteristic to each:

- 1) The first such dimension is rather easy to grasp when watching a video recording²¹⁰, listening to an audio recording or reading interview transcripts – as long as one is willing to focus on the moments unveiling the processes of socialisation into social-cultural roles of man and woman (and effects thereof), graspable as they are with use of the gender (i.e. 'cultural sex') category. As any other experience, the camp experience is observable and analysable from such a standpoint as well. To put it differently: the autobiographical narrations of the former female inmates do not essentially stand out in this respect from those uttered by women who were not imprisoned in a camp but lived within the same social-cultural space and time.

As part of his analysis of an account he received from a German Jewess who survived Auschwitz, Michael Pollak finds that, along with any other legitimate interpretation, this woman's life ought to be read as a woman's lot

209 I make this generalised statement by referring to my experiences related to the recordings I have made with female inmates of Ravensbrück, Auschwitz and Majdanek as part of two KARTA Centre documentary projects: *A women's testimony: females and totalitarianism* (2003–4) and *International Slave and Forced Labourers Documentation Project* (2005–6).

210 The interview with Irena Rowińska has been video-recorded; the other two are audio-recorded.

(*Frauenschicksal*). He takes a careful look at the femininity in his interlocutor's utterance, taking note of the great role played in it by private occurrences and interpersonal relations, the way in which this woman unveils her own likes and dislikes, her compassion – as well as the emotions or lack thereof; also, the way she distances herself from, if not ignoring altogether, the legal-institutional interpretations of her experiences. All of this makes her report different from the accounts of men, or at least, from 'manly' ones. It befits that my observations are similar to those of Pollak: whenever I watch, listen to, or read the accounts of former female prisoners (and, within this reading, necessarily compare them to those of male inmates), similar reflections come to my mind. I would perhaps complement them by stating that female accounts tend to be 'denser', with more specific close-ups, vivid images propelled by the memories.

All these differences between the women's and men's narrations, or between female and male ones, are obviously relative. These are certain models, ideal types, with the specific accounts getting closer to, or further from, them – although women's stories more frequently tend to have much in common with the female narrative type while men's stories, with the male type.

This finding also extends to our interviews with former Mauthausen inmates. Let us take a look at a few such female, gender-related moments; first, those dating to the childhood years in Warsaw. Here is how one of our interviewees Irena Norwa, born in 1928, speaks of her sentiments toward her older brother:

I had an elder brother, four years my elder; born in the year nineteen twenty-eight. Stanisław was his name; / Stanisław-Włodzimierz. I loved my brother very much, and he did love me too. He was my ideal of man, // this is what I thought to myself then already, // that, just like him, // then, the time I was ten already, I figured out for myself that my future husband should be like him. My brother was so good a man and so handsome, so nice-looking and so good he was, that // he took so much care of me, like. He taught me, he primarily took care of me then, the time my father perished, [it was] when the Occupation was on already. He would play with me; when I was a little child, he knew how to play with me too. He would always play the nicest games with me, // he played a [religious] procession with me. I would sprinkle the flowers, and he marched, having, on a small broom, // there were such beautiful little brooms with which to dust clothes at the time, // and some veil of our mother's, and that was a monsternce. And he'd march, dressed into a priest, and I would sprinkle the flowers in front of him. Those were the very pleasant games we played. And since there was a very big one, one of the rooms, some sort of thirty [square] metres, then we, around the table, // that was the dining room, // around the table were we walking. He was still a young man then. He was a very good student, was graduating from the '[King] Władysław IV [Vasa]' gymnasium [i.e. grammar school], in Warsaw, Praga district. He completed his high-school exams in year thirty-nine. He was a man so talented. // [pause] How old was he then, in fact? Seventeen? I can remember one

thing, as he took his entrance exams for the school, 'Władysław IV', he passed to the second grade at once – he was admitted. He omitted grade one, so uniquely gifted he was. This is perhaps why he was so fast to complete those studies at the Warsaw University during the Occupation, at the [secret] sets [i.e. underground education courses].

The brother motif reappears elsewhere in this account, during our subsequent meeting, as his involvement and eventual death in the Warsaw Uprising is remembered:

It was yesterday that I was looking for it [the photograph]. And I must say to you, madam, that // I'll give it to you once again, so that you can maybe scan it for yourself. Because, looking at it, then those are such beautiful young Columbuses²¹¹, and these ones are for certain those from the Officer-Cadet School. ... He sensed so much the need to defend this Poland. He considered Poland his other mother. I can remember this precisely. I am getting tears in my eyes still today, and then, we both [i.e. me and my mother] cried. [*moved*] So good a kid was he! And then he went away. And we've never seen him again. After that, very soon after, it was the fifteenth, wasn't it, of August, they came over and threw us away from this house.

And again, later in the interview:

But he was God's chosen one and this is why God took him away; as to prevent him from going spoiled in this world.

These are just a few selected quotes in which this intense recollection of her brother appears. This narration displays many more similar images. Is it a completely ordinary story (also due to the idealisation factor) of a brother who was killed in the Uprising? Perhaps it is – but it is also true that none of the 161 men recorded within the project would say so much in such an elevated, engaged, and sentimental way about their brothers or sisters. And there were a number of people with similar biographies indeed.

This same recording has preserved an expressive image of the first days under the Occupation, although the image does not appear there by itself, a strong interpretation being joined with it – and we can clearly see the meanings given to the image by the narrator:

211 Referring to the 'Columbus Generation'. The term denotes the generation of young Polish intelligentsia born soon after Poland regained her independence in 1918, and whose adolescence was marked by dramatic experiences of WW2, especially the Warsaw Uprising. The term comes from the novel *Kolumbowie. Rocznik 20* (1957) by Roman Bratny, who was an exponent of that generation.

My auntie ... was delivering a baby. She had a girl born on September the eighth. As her husband was absent, since he had just been off for a so-called, // it was called a *rajza* [from German *Reise*, a 'tour'] then. // For a *rajza*, on the General's command. ... And then, the tough experiences began for me. For, first, it's that for a child, the delivery of a baby that was small then, in such an openness of sorts, in such a, // it was a shock for me then. I didn't know how children were born. ... So it was, from the start, // they set me into an adult life of some sort. A transit to, // to some kind of adulthood. That I am, all of a sudden, // that I've become an adult; at this moment in my life. That I am such a, well, on equal terms with, // made aware of things, with my mum. That my mum, // there was of course some midwife accompanying this, but that awareness; // I say, 'Mummy, what's this, that's happened?' 'A child's been born.' 'But it wasn't a stork [that carried it], was it?' Well, and then this, just this, came to my consciousness, that I was an adult. I had been ranked already within such, yet, // within a sort of responsibility, // in an instant. [*pause*]

And it was about responsibility because you had to take care – the auntie was very ill – of that child. My mom was busy arranging for some milk for my auntie. For food shortages showed up straight away. Medical care for the auntie was scarce. 'Cause you couldn't find a doctor. There was nothing to bathe the child in. // Arranging for water, // as Warsaw fell short of water then already. Those were really tough moments. And there, responsibility began at once in my ten-year-old life for that the child had to be bathed. That I ought to help out, that I ought to take some care of that child. I readily had my duties, at once. [*pause*] And I've been struggling with those duties till this day, so to say it, just here between us. Always, this responsibility for someone else's life has been encumbered upon me.²¹²

Starting with the astonishment experienced by a young girl at the sight of a child being born, just a couple of sentences further on, we are unexpectedly faced with the end of her life – the moment filled, as we can learn, with a responsibility for the lives of others. Again, it is likely that a larger number of those I have interviewed have once nursed or looked after their younger brothers and sisters, and then later on, their own children, feeling responsible for them. Yet, no one else has thematised this motif: this is not the sort of a matter that would come to one's mind while constructing an autobiography in the situation of being interviewed. It would not, as it does not fit a male/manly story.

One of the standard questions we usually asked as the interview was nearing an end, was (regardless of how such questions were expressed) about the consequences of the camp experiences – and wartime experiences in general, about their individual memory, any reoccurring unwelcome recollections or obtrusive dreams. The replies given were obviously varied; some interviewees told us about memories gnawing them at night, some others, that any such

212 From the account of Irena Norwa, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_033 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

reminiscences have long ago been averted, flushed out by the rapid current of everyday life. But even amidst this diversity, the answer given by one female survivor draws our attention through its womanly singularity:

No. No, madam. I didn't have the time. I did not have the time to sit around dwelling what, who, when, and for how much. I simply didn't have time for it. As I'm saying, I was working, doing a legitimate work, I ran the household, and so, breakfast, luncheon, dinner, and so on. As my husband didn't like doing it, it was me then to see to the kid, whether he did his homework, and how he did it, ... anything that was related to the kid. Later on, when my mom was older, then I was handling my mom. Yea, so I didn't have the time to sit down, and dwell. Instead, I did have time to sit in the evening and read a book. That's what I could find some time for. But to dwell about what, who, and when, again – there was no time, simply. Besides, well, what for, actually? There was no point sitting and dwelling, what, when. Then, this is what it looked like.²¹³

This is an excerpt where womanhood and manhood appear expressly, and not only as traits of a narrative: in the first place, as differences in the experience, and at a supra-individual level, as social inequalities, distinct divisions explainable in gender terms. This is also worth noting in order to show that the discourse is not a conclusive entity here – there are important splits reconstructed in everyday interactions, based whereupon a social reality is built (or, was built, in this particular case, as the past is being referred to). Having ascertained this, it is perhaps worthwhile to make one more step toward a methodological afterthought whereby the experience-based narrative and the experience itself appear to be interpenetrative here; the other finding is that, analysing the experience-related narrative – probably the only thing we can do while elaborating a biographical account – we do not tear up the ties with a social reality. On the contrary, this reality may appear to us in a very distinctive and specific form: not within an abstract structure but in the subjective meanings the narrator fills his or her story with. In an autobiographical interview, these meanings are not of any possible type but are socially constituted, simultaneously forming part of the constitution of a social universe.²¹⁴

Let us follow one more female reply – this time, in response to a question asked in a different way, as part of another interview. The question sought the impact exerted by the interlocutor's camp experience on her after-camp life (clearly, as far as realisable), or even on conscious choices she has made in her life if instigated by it.

213 From the account of Irena Rowińska, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_165 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

214 See A. Rokuszewska-Pawelek, *op. cit.*, pp. 42–43.

I have learned ... how to help the others, you know? And this ... has remained with me so and I, in fact, have been doing it permanently, till this day.

We can better understand this reply once aware of its broader biographical context. The interlocutor was born in 1921 (and was the oldest woman recorded as part of our project); before the war, she assisted her father in running a hairdresser's outlet. During the Occupation, she worked for the Red Cross and was involved in conspiratorial activities, probably serving with the Home Army (abbr. in Polish as 'AK').

You know, I find it rather difficult to tell you, at the moment. Well, that was, probably, // I think that was the AK. But this is not the way they'd say it, is it. So I can't very well remember what it was. So, // and then, I received the, // in 1943, I got an advice telling me that I was supposed to turn up at, // in Aleje-Szucha [J.C. Szucha Avenue, Warsaw], to the Gestapo [headquarters]. So, I should suppose, I must've got into hot water, since I was walking around, delivering those letters, then I had somewhere, // I've even got, by the way, a Red Cross ID, with me.

In the Warsaw Uprising, this interviewee assisted as a nurse:

There was the, // it was operational, the 'Transfiguration of Our Lord' Hospital in Praga [district], then we carried those wounded ones into there in fear. And then, in August 1944, the Germans grabbed the dressing station I was in. And they took me away to the camp in the apron and the cap.

The war over, she settled in the United Kingdom where she opened a hairdressing outlet of her own some time later (she eventually returned to Poland in 1985).

The motif of helping the others and, to an extent, sacrificing oneself for them, reappears in this particular autobiography. It adds meaning to the varied scattered experiences and becomes the narrative's binding factor. The real aid offered to the others (I do not doubt it occurred) comes secondary here – the significance it assumes for the narrator herself being of primary importance; the sense it furnishes her with.

The camp, actually – I didn't break down in the situation I saw myself in, just conversely. I rather set out to helping the others, didn't I; which did help me a lot. Me personally, right? For I [thus] had a business to attend, ...well, and also later on, the war over, when already in those camps, same thing. When I got to the United Kingdom, I also got involved in that *Polonia* work [i.e. activities related to the local Polish community], that is, organising a Polish life in the UK.²¹⁵

I have already mentioned the detailedness characteristic of the women's memories. This can be testified to by a number of examples across the three interviews

215 From the account of Alina Krajewska, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_002 (recorded by Agnieszka Knyt).

with former Mauthausen female inmates. The passages quoted below should suffice to illustrate the female precision, sensitivity to detail:

Well, and, madam, I usually could successfully make my way to school in ten minutes. And if from school, then I would walk, and walk again. Especially in winter did I walk for a long time, for there were excellent hills there, there was a [school] bag on which you could slide. And so, on the bag, and gee up!, down the hill. And I usually would always get, what you call, a couple of smacks on the butt, as I was completely soaked when back home, not to mention the boots which I usually quickly took off, or dried them on the stairwell radiator; ... took them off, yes, so that they wouldn't be noticed, so to cram them somewhere so my mom didn't see they were wet, that you could, what you call it, wring them out. Well, // but, in the end, children have their rights, do they not? And so my father would always say, 'Leave her alone. C'mon, can't you see the kid just wants to have a slide?' And then mom says, 'Damn it, does she have to do it with the bag, then?'²¹⁶

This vividness of narrative imaging is not limited to a happy childhood – the time is all the happier if contrasted with the later-date imprisonment at a Nazi concentration camp: it extends to the narration regarding the latter, the way that led to the camp and, before that, the daily life under the Occupation. The following opinion was expressed about the latter aspect in one of the interviews:

Well, for you had to know something. Yeah, this is how the years passed one after the other. There was not much that changed in our family, well, since my father normally worked with the... // 'normally' did I say, for a German company.

This interview brings along a number of concrete facts recalled, not completely ordinary images – such as this one, for instance:

Just figure this out: one day, we are sitting with my parents at home, reading a bulletin – that is, such, secret, AK [Home-Army] periodical of some sort. The door is locked up, and there's fire made in the kitchen [range]. One of the stove-lids in the kitchen [range] is moved aside, just in case, just if, // then the bulletin should be thrown into the fire at once. So, we're just sitting there, quietly, using, actually, the fire in the kitchen [range], not switching any light on, and then, someone's inserting a key into our lock. So, my father instantly threw the bulletin into the kitchen [range], so it started burning. The door is getting opened with a key, someone else's key, and there's a woman entering, entering our apartment, a woman who lives in the same house, on the same floor, and who, // I don't know, after all, who she was, but she was probably some German spy, in any case she incessantly had contacts with Germans,

216 From the account of Irena Rowińska, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_165 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

they turned up at her place constantly, there were constantly some libations going on, etc. I don't know, sorry to say, whether [she was] just a German wench, or something else still. This is what I don't know.

And the father says, 'Excuse me, but what are *you* doing in here?' She says, 'I wanted to see if you are at home.' 'Well, and if there were none of us here, then?' 'Then I would lock [the door] up and go away.' So, then, of course, no one said anything more, well, as no one knew what to say in such a situation. In any case, using the opportunity of her not being there, my father replaced the lock the following day, ... as there was nothing else befitting to be done. Using the opportunity of her not being there, so she did not see that the lock is [being] replaced. I think she got to know on the occasion she wanted to have it unlocked again. So, such, well, unusual occurrences took place there, in that house, and several times so, anyhow.²¹⁷

Her recollections of the experiences directly preceding the camp are equally detailed. This is a fragment of a different biographical story:

Well, so I took such a tiny jacket, madam, I had [it] made of my grandma's topcoat. It was, sort of, velour, some kind of embossed, with a collar. My mother had a mole jacket, I can remember. And a tiny mole collar, such, 'cause there was a black mole collar. Then, I had that one, and this jacket did I only have, you know. For I, I say, it's summertime, this, isn't it. Flip-flops on my feet, such, // actually, not quite flip-flops. Those were, such, perforated booties, on a low tiny cork-sole. The cork-shoes were, of the sort, en vogue then already. The heels uncovered, and, such, the toes uncovered. There was something like, // on such, see, such a, two or three centimetre[-high] cork-sole, such a, as if, // that was wedge-shaped heel, sort of. Then, I had those flip-flops [on], a white skirt and a blouse, red-, // a white one, red-dotted. This was the way I got dressed, more like a national way.

And there is still an untypical, precise reminiscence from inside the wagon the narrator was travelling in, with her mother, from Pruszków to Mauthausen. The close-up is targeted at the other persons on the train. This is all the more interesting – as a historical detail, although such details are not my focus herein – that in the accounts of men (particularly those from the Warsaw transports) there are almost no close-ups from within the wagons carrying them to the camps.

There were, // they had meat, some cold-meat. My mother asked, 'Where have you got this from?' And they said, 'We have killed a hog, madam. And besides, we have a bakery.' And they had breads, very good baker's goods they had moreover. So, they had things to eat, then. [*laughs*] I can remember them very willingly sharing [these goods with the others]. Indeed, they treated very much [i.e. a great deal]: 'But go ahead, madam!' They always treated us, // I, can remember, I ate some ham. There, in

217 Ibidem.

the wagon. 'Cause they had some pieces of a sort, you know. Whether that was marinated, or baked, or whatever? There were such small pieces of that ham. That was not, like, a ham cut, as it is into slices, but there were, like, pieces of ham. And so, you can see what it's like. [*laughs*] Such things do happen too.

When characterising, earlier on, the reactions of the Varsovians transported to the camp in the summer of 1944, I stressed the absence, be it temporary absence, of images associated with Jewish dwellers of the city, with the Ghetto, or the Ghetto Uprising. I emphasised that these images only appeared when evoked by the questions; that they were constructed from safe afar, with a psychological distance, through a reverse telescope. This also held true, albeit to a somewhat lesser extent, with the accounts whose authors had Jewish neighbours or passed by Jewish people as they were moving houses beyond the Ghetto, as together with their parents they populated apartments deserted by the Jews outside the enclosed district's walls, having quit their previous residences now located inside the enclosure. This thread also appears in the reports of our female interviewees. The way it appears is, however, different and more complex, albeit the experience watched from the outside as a historical experience does not differ much from the one shared by this female narrator:

For me, those were very strange, as the acquaintances who lived in the same house – and I lived on Puławska St., as I said – suddenly started moving to somewhere else. For me, this was incomprehensible, for a child. That, what's up: well, that couple, the lady I visited, with whom I talked, with whom I read books, and so forth, is leaving the house all of a sudden, bids farewell, crying, is leaving for somewhere else. She's leaving. Says she's leaving. I couldn't learn, in fact, what it was like, about this trip, as my parents didn't want to talk to me about it. At last, I was suspecting on my own, most diverse things. Then I could see some people walking along the street, armbands on their arms, having a star on those armbands. 'A star', 'cause I didn't know what that was. Then, and when already, // well, as typical with a child, a very, very stubborn and inquisitive one, overall, willing to know everything, I got at last to know that it was about the Jews, who must leave our house, that they have to go away from here, that no one knows if they're ever to be back, that you'd rather say goodbye to them. ... Well, indeed, not only some Poles moved in to their place. Since the house was part of the so-called German district, a plenty of Germans moved in, in place of those who had to go away from their home.

It is not so much a care for detail or so-called photographic memory²¹⁸ that draws our attention in this latter image: it is, rather, the narrator's focus on

218 Why 'so-called' rather than genuine, see in T. Maruszewski, op. cit.; in specific, chapter 5: 'Generative processes in the autobiographical memory' and remarks therein on the 'record now' mechanism – 'flash'-like operation of memory (pp. 98–106).

specific interpersonal relations, concrete individuals. When listening to this interview or, better still, watching its video-recorded version, we gain certainty that this image of Jewish neighbours is more significant to the narrator, and more difficult for her to bear, than the one she observed through the window in the spring of 1943, as evoked elsewhere while interviewed:

Well, so we've been reading a little; ... there was a man hanging around the flat. Well, but what we most often did was looking at those horrid wreaths of smoke which were getting out of that Jewish quarter. Horrible, black ones, as anything which could be burning – was burning. Humans included....

The Ghetto was on fire, in any case, and the view was, well, awful, when you're sitting at home and watching through the window, as, / as this was the only way you could watch. You're looking through the window: black clouds, clouds of smoke, the fetor, fetor unbelievable.²¹⁹

A recollection similar to the one appearing in the second quote is also found in interviews with the men who lived in Warsaw at the time; they are however reluctant to mention their Jewish neighbours.

Such female focus, extending to what is occurring between individuals (and what is not in every case apparent), rather than to what people do and what is happening to them, may drive the memory and the (autobiographical) narrative toward some untypical camp-related images. Let us refer to them, as this section of our analysis is nearing conclusion:

No, only that green food was available. That food of ours had been finished yet, the sugar remained, and some amount of the spirit. Nothing else was there yet, but // just more. Of that sugar, there was, like, a box, a cardboard-box of such sugar we had. Well, then mom was dispensing that sugar. [*pause*] But one time, I went off and took this sugar and dropped it off to one of the prisoners. This was because on one side of those *zelt* [*sic*; i.e. tents], where you could not trespass, I could see some people. I went there. Me – I was so curious. I went there and saw, // there were those, wearing those caps, // those that put those caps off while standing at attention – they'd put the cap off, and all were in their striped uniforms; with the numbers, of course, as well, the camp numbers. And [there] was such a terribly poor, such a skinny man.

I went into a type of shrubs, like. ... On the one side, upon, // on the one side, I could only see the barracks. ... It was from where those barracks stood that the *heftlings* were coming over. Those functional ones, usually those came over only, there were no others. The others, the, like, dreadful ones, famished by then, I could see from the other side, then. But there, you could not walk in. It was banned to trespass there.

219 From the account of Irena Rowińska, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_165 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

And there, the thing was that, // that such small bushes grew there. As I once crept up on there, on those bushes. 'Cause I wanted to see what was there. And there I could see people walking, but they weren't, // they walked on some, like, // they walked there on stones. But, was it stairs? No, I don't think so. They were chopping it. There were various heights of it. And here, not too far from me, not quite far, as I'd crept up on there, I crouched down inside those bushes. And, how I, / how foolish was I, wasn't I? Was I supposed to expose my mother so? I was there twice, // for I threw the sugar [in]. I had stolen that sugar, which I had at home, and went [there] once again, threw the sugar too. And I told my mother, then, I think. And I saw, // there were only those in striped uniforms, in clogs on their feet, and they were so horribly, // and the Germans guarding them with their rifles....

Yes, // I did go there, // day after day. That was one day after the other, for sure; for I was curious what it was like. All the more that, as I watched it so, and saw that 'P' [letter] – as he had, here [*showing the spot*], the number and the 'P' – I thought it was a Pole, that, and he was a political prisoner *and* a Pole. 'P', that was a 'P', that's a Pole, you know. Yes. And it was for him that I dropped off that sugar in there....

What I know is that the man was slim, young. ... A starveling he was, sort of. He had, like, a rather prominent nose. I'd only looked at him, then I would, / I'd always recognise him. ... He was walking there, went on with that stone. ... I lay there for some time, / just for a moment I looked there. And I threw the sugar. The sugar, bare, no wrapping, a sugar lump. We had a single pack of sugar lumps. And I threw it like that. But whether he took it, this I don't know. Don't know. But he saw it. // [MKC, the interviewer:] And was there a moment that you looked at each other, you and him? // Yes there was, yes. Yes. That's why I'm saying that he had such blue eyes. So, what was the distance I was at? Four meters, to five, from that; as he was walking, I saw, right by that chicken-wire. ... And, the other day, as I saw him, then I only threw the sugar the farthest I could. I told my mom. Mom said, 'I beg you, don't you ever go there. 'Cause they'll really shoot you dead. You're not supposed to do it.' '*Verboten*' is what was written there, so you were told not to approach the place. A ban on approaching....

'Cause I felt pity. I knew they were hungry. I simply knew they were hungry. Well, that's a normal thing, after all. Why, what can I give to a man like this? Something that I've got, well, there's nothing else I can give him. Only what I have got, then there was an amount of that sugar. My mom took, like, a quarter, she only had quarter a litre of a spirit; of a genuine one. She said, this should always... // And, the sugar. There was nothing else that we had. A bit, sort of, I think, of some bread she'd take, or of something. Things, like, and whatever there'd been at home.²²⁰

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220 From the account of Irena Norwa, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_033 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

The women transported into Mauthausen during the Warsaw Uprising shared quite a similar lot. The arrival at the camp (the youngest were normally accompanied by their mothers), the initiation procedure – the ritual of passage into the camp universe, and, lastly, a few weeks stay at the camp tent outside of the main camp area:

The tent, not, // I think it was – and I'm saying 'I think', as I don't know – but I should suppose it was, some sort of, devised for a hundred people maybe, for it was enormous. It stood on something-like, which had been a meadow sometime before. I'm saying, 'had been, sometime before', as it had long ago ceased to be any meadow.

There, they waited – for anything, really, as they were completely unaware of what to expect:

We did nothing, just waiting. For something, I don't know for what.

As it turned out, what they waited for was a dispatch to forced labour in various localities of Upper Austria. There, their routes parted (in some cases, also the ways of mothers and their daughters), sometimes quite radically. Some of the women, and girls too, would be made workers at armament factories and other manufacturing plants.

I had a furnace in front of me, and had to operate that furnace, pour into it, // but in order to pour coke, the slag had to be first removed, right? But that was hard. I am not capable, now, // I could not manage this. So, I'd take something like, a sharp thing, I don't know what it was called there, something sharp, in any case, [and] I broke that slag to pieces, then I extracted that slag from the furnace, put it on a shovel, dragged this shovel across the boiler station, as it was hard. And only [then] did I throw that slag somewhere out there, where there was the place fit for it.²²¹

My task was to wash the bottles. ... That is, there was an enormous tub; what I had to do was place the bottles into the large tub filled with water, after that, I, with both hands, those bottles, // I took the bottles, placed them into two, like, baths, // from the bottle washing machine, two brushes, // with both hands, and put them off. There the washing was done, water was poured into the bottle, and I put them off into the crates. Once washed up, into the crates. I had to wash those bottles well, because I was checked for their cleanness. Sometimes I got those bottles returned; but with no malignant comments made. I cannot say I had [= was getting] malignant comments with that. Only that I was soaked up, head to toe, in water. That is, from my chin down

221 From the account of Irena Rowińska, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_165 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

to my feet was I soaked. I worked there, more or less, till mid-December, I think, until I got pneumonia.²²²

Others were much luckier, if employed with family service businesses or assisting with Austrian households:

Oh, and in January it was that they sent me also, once, to a hairdresser's outlet to assist in some tidying-up. And, the owner of that hairdressing outlet learned that I was, // that my parents had been hairdressers, then she came along and said that she didn't want me to come over to her from the camp for sanitary reasons, you know. That she takes responsibility for me and, // that I should spend the nights at her place. Well, and then it was, // for so many months [*laughs*], I slept on a sheet then. I stayed at her place there till the very end of the war. It was at hers that I worked....

Yes. And I did it secretly [i.e. manicuring, which was commonly banned then due to shortage of rationed chemicals (PF's note)]. In such a paint booth. Those friends of hers would come in, and I did the manicure for them. [*gaily*] For me it was quite a lot, because, you know, they would give me tips. Not in the form of money, for I wouldn't have bought anything with it, as I didn't have the right to buy. But, say, they'd bring along an apple, a pear. Something-like, of sorts, whatever. Some piece of a cake brought from home, or what not. And that one [i.e. her landlady/employer] arranged for the [ration] cards for me then. Since she registered my residence, that I abode at her house. And I had the food [i.e. ration] cards. This means that already then I could go to a restaurant and have a card like that exchanged for food of some sort. A glass of milk per day plus something else, and she would always drop something off for me, and those ladies also, something more to eat. So, it was a bit better with the feeding. [...] And I was at her place till the, // the war was over and even after the war I worked at hers for a month.²²³

Some of these different routes would intersect, if not meet again, later on, in the spring or summer of 1945. Such was the shared experience of the group of women at that point – their collective wartime trajectory. Diverse individual trajectories contributed to it, their common climax being their stay at Mauthausen. Our female interlocutors had only a brush with the camp, having to do with it just for a little while – and moreover, at that time constantly balancing on the border of being on the inside/outside of its world. They had made their way to the Nazi camp and had been through a complete passage ritual, but eventually were not consumed by the camp machinery. This is already visible in the earlier-quoted excerpts, where male inmates are perceived from an

222 From the account of Irena Norwa, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_033 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

223 From the account of Alina Krajewska, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_002 (recorded by Agnieszka Knyt).

external-observer position – the position located outside of the camp’s social space, not being part of the camp’s male-prisoner community. This ought not to be surprising: the tents were put up beyond the walls, in any case; the idle waiting must have somehow contrasted with the bustle of the people wearing their striped uniforms, as observable from that position. The place itself was different from the one made into the striped-uniform wearers’ lot: seen from the outside, Mauthausen looked like a walled fortress, completely dissimilar to the makeshift tent lair:

No, there was nobody to guard us there. There was no guarding of us. Just those *heftlings* were coming over. No one guarded us.²²⁴

Yet, let us not get completely misled by this external perspective of looking at the camp, or by this topographic difference between the experiences of former female and male inmates. This short contact with the camp, which was typical to the women imprisoned at Mauthausen, who ‘had a brush’ with it, occurs to be a very deep-reaching and traumatic experience for them. This is because it implied a violent and brutal breach of their womanliness, since not a gender dimension of this aspect was at stake but rather, the biological dimension; at least, primarily biological.

- 2) The other dimension of the differences between the biographical stories of men and women is much harder to analyse, though it appears much plainer before a researcher than the one described first. This is, namely, the sphere of experiences taking place within the space of biological sex, sexuality, and corporeality or, more precisely still, its breach, infringement and violation. Clearly, one can consider the social mechanisms of constructing a taboo with which we surround these spaces of human experience and, though using such deconstruction, blur the border between the first and the second herein-discerned dimension of experiencing the camp by women. It however seems that an intellectual operation of this sort would not be of much use for our present purpose, as it would not move the argument forward. It will occur that the question is not about discourses or borderlines delimiting the scopes of notions; there is something much more serious, and much more human at stake.

While associating with the testimonies of women imprisoned in concentration camps, we can find moments – some of them hardly visible but others, strikingly distinct – proving qualitatively different from all the other fragments of the narrative. We cannot deal with them quite well – they pose a research challenge – but an ethical challenge they imply is even stronger. We can see,

224 From the account of Irena Norwa, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_033 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

hear, and feel that they conceal not only a breached taboo of human sexuality or carnality, but a real attempt on, and violation of, this delicate sphere of human identity.

The point is not merely sexual violence, as a narrow concept, or even its varieties, or crossed borderlines: embarrassment, humiliation, psychical violence. What we are after is extended, and actually focused on indirect violence, that is structural in a sense, inscribed in the ordinary camp experience. Such violence manifests itself in restricted intimacy, in a radical reduction of the possibility to satisfy one's physiological and hygienic needs, in being deprived of adequate clothing and in a variety of other ways. The common denominator is that the integrity and intimacy of the imprisoned persons is infringed.²²⁵ Such infringement is obviously not limited to women, although these infringement/violation incidences appear much more frequently with respect to women. The consequences probably penetrate deeper; this is why what is just taken note of (or completely neglected because considered insignificant – in which case it is hard to refer to a breach, as a breach has assumedly to be subjectively experienced) gains acuteness to a much larger extent.

This is true already at the stage of transport from Pruszków to Mauthausen. In the interviews with the women, a recollection reappears that is absent in the men's accounts – or, even if it appears there, it gets thematised otherwise, not so dramatically.

They opened in Czechoslovakia – it was the first opening of the wagons, and you could come out and fill, I'm afraid, // your physiological needs, but unfortunately, underneath the wagon. But this was impossible, either; impossible, unfortunately, as the Germans with their rifles were standing everywhere [around]. Everywhere. On the one side, and on the other. Well, you absolutely couldn't relieve yourself. And this was so till the time grew late. But someone had just made a restroom of the other section of the wagon. That was what we didn't need anymore. Someone's torn out a piece of board. And there you would walk to settle the matter; to the wagons being

225 I owe these distinctions – along with much inspiration followed up in this chapter – to the penetrating and sensitive analyses carried out by Helga Amesberger, Katrin Auer and Brigitte Halbmayr in their important work *Sexualisierte Gewalt. Weibliche Erfahrungen in NS-Konzentrationslagern*, Wien 2004. Based upon their interviews with female inmates of Ravensbrück, these authoresses disclose various manifestations of sexual violence against women within the camp. *Sexualisierte Gewalt*, i.e. 'sexualised violence', is the notion they consistently stick to in their analyses – as contrasted with *sexuelle Gewalt* – 'sexual violence'. The former is much broader in scope, as it extends to certain less plain instances of infringed sexual integrity (see, in particular, pp. 18 ff. of the aforesaid book) and is much better fit for description of female camp-related experiences.

in motion. That's what it was like. So, you could manage that. ... But burdensome it was, for that was a withholding of the normal course of life, the functioning of your organism, for a few days.

On the second meeting with her, this narrator depicted a similar (tape-recorded) image:

The worst thing was about that relieving. It was a disaster. Well, relieving yourself, well, to give this debt back to nature, it was so tough that I only did this when at Mauthausen. I found it very hard while there still. Also, this was with no shield, in sum, 'cause that, such, two, such, carrycots, // actually, // kind of, // there, once in Mauthausen, there were, like // this was carried by two people. Those were, like, // how'd I draw it for you? Well, I would have to draw this, madam. Those were, as if, like // double, // two rods. In the middle of those two rods, as if, composite with some sort of // crate, in which there was some bucket. A bucket stood there. And two people carried it. One on the front, [the other] one on the other [side], and now please tell me: when they placed it in the middle, then everyone's watching, where's it to relieve yourself? You had to sit on that. Truly, there were hardships, enormous. It was the same when they opened us in those wagons already, and you could get off on some railway sidings. And as I was just starting there, and there, a German with a rifle stood and watched if I didn't, // if I, // where would I have gone, madam?²²⁶

The central moment in the former prisoners' autobiographical stories is their camp initiation, rituals of passage, the clashing against the concentration camp and getting shocked and paralysed with it. These recollections return as expressive images in almost all the narrations – whether female or male. But it is just in the women's narrative that the image is dominated by the experience of brutal denudation, exposure, nakedness, and infringed intimacy. This is what has been most strongly impressed in the women's memory, as it threatened their deepest sense of integrity, mutilated their self-image while exposing them to the view of others. The men we have recorded were subject to an almost identical procedure upon entering the camp; though routine as it was, the interactive context varied by type of situation – with men or women entering the same male camp. This might perhaps be the only reason why nakedness reappears so strongly in the women's memoirs – as a trace of a non-extinguished trauma. When reading the following excerpts, it must be borne in mind that the nudity means a denudation before the SS personnel 'operating' the new *Zugang*, as well as before the male inmates. I remind of this circumstance as it becomes concealed in the reminiscences.

226 From the account of Irena Norwa, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_033 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

My mother says, 'Well, looks like that's the end; looks like this is our end.' Well, but there was no option to retreat. We went to that bath. Well, they of course took all of our clothes away from us, which were passed to a delousing station. In turn, we were led into a grand room, a dark one, obviously. That is, there were no windows there, apart from some small windows higher up. Later on I learned what those small windows actually were, and what that was. I didn't know then. And some time after that, water was poured upon us, a bathing was procured for us. That water was wonderful [*ironically*], 'cause it was so awfully cold that it is so astounding that water can be this cold at all. I don't know, [it was] probably supplied from some spring. The water was pissing out of the top, the bottom, the side – everywhere. There was nowhere to take refuge from that water, and it was so terribly cold that it's hard to figure out if you could bear it there any longer. The water was running on, I don't know for how long; in any case, when it was tapped off, someone there said that now they'd sure pour the gas in. Hah, but there was silence.

Nobody would utter a word. We were waiting: will they open the gate through which they've let us in, or not? Well, after however-many minutes, it was opened. We walked out of that room, naked; happy that we're still alive. After some time, maybe three hours later, or maybe more, // we stood there naked, of course, waited for our clothes from that delousing station. Well, when we received the clothes from the delousing station, then there were the lice: genuine, beautiful, big beautiful lice, which we received together with our clothes.²²⁷

An extremely similar image reappears in another narration:

This was, // yes, this was right behind the gate. As the gate was crossed yet, to the left, I saw this. And then we were separated, there. Since there, in the transport, there were men too. So the men were separated at once into that main camp, and us, // and the women, // and there were a few children, then they drove us forth into a place, like. They told us to get undressed naked. Take off, you know, the clothes. And after, across, such, two rooms we were walking. There were plenty of Germans there and there, they, out of that, // I'm not one-hundred-percent sure, but rather, yes – they selected out of those naked women [some] for a, such a, brothel which was there for those military men, within the camp. And, we walked into the room, such that was clad with tiles. Well, and they tapped off the water. And then I was told we'd been lucky they had taped the water off; for, in that place, they could've taped off the gas. Then, people [would go] to the crematorium, wouldn't they. There was. Well, so then, we, // they didn't give us striped uniforms, only did they throw out, after, such, // after disinfection, our clothes; on a large, like, heap, and said, 'Choose yourself your clothes.' And, so we were searching then within it.²²⁸

227 From the account of Irena Rowińska, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_165 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichočka).

228 From the account of Alina Krajewska, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_002 (recorded by Agnieszka Knyt).

Another woman we have taken a recording of stayed in the camp together with the last quoted interviewee. The way she paints the initiation and bathing scene is even more precise. In her image, there is no water running from the taps; otherwise, both ladies were together at the camp baths, and consequently, one of these memoirs contains a factographic error. Which one, namely, is not my task to resolve; such resolution is perhaps impossible today. For me, more important are the significances or meanings added by these narrators to those experiences. Among these meanings, across the three accounts, the conviction that gas could have been released from the taps reappears very strongly, that the place was not a camp bath but a gas chamber instead. This tension penetrates each of these narrative images – what is more, they are founded upon it. Whether water was released or whether the taps were used at all is less important than the conclusive outcome: no gas was let in. For such sense-making effort of the memory, it is not primarily important that Polish women brought to Mauthausen were not killed – especially, in a gas chamber, albeit there was an operational gas chamber at the time. Let us now trace the other image from inside the camp baths and from the very same moment:

We would've been standing, // it was, I think, // what was the most tragic thing about the camp. This is because, listen: we stood there and my mummy hugged me against her, [pause] but my aunts were not there. There was Ala. She hugged me against her, and so we stood there. And the water did not run. And then, someone at the other end, there, // it was a room, sort of, // such one like this room. [pause] Maybe a little bigger, but, I don't think so. And somebody at this other end, there // someone intoned, 'Who gives oneself over to the care of his Lord'²²⁹ And everyone started singing. This was tragic for me then. I realised then that it was *the* end already, right then. Mum hugged me against her and thus we endured till the moment, // and all of a sudden, the door is opening on the other side. 'Weg! Raus! Raus! Raus!' And, those clothes lay there. Those same ones, dirty. Removed, or what? Or perhaps someone had removed them there. And I just couldn't find my shoe. In one shoe, // with the shoe, something like that, // but later, someone picked [it] up for me, gave it to me; said, 'Here's some shoe yet'. Someone gave me that shoe, some lady. And I, with that shoe, // and we were thrown out, // led through to the roll-call ground. For the first time. ...

Someone said, 'Oh God, oh God! A miracle.' Someone said so. But, // oh yes, like this, there was something like this.²³⁰

The exit from the baths and covering the body with one's regained clothes puts an end to a stage in the camp initiation whilst not overruling the threats and breaches of the sphere of intimacy and sexuality. On the contrary, the entry

229 Polish church hymn, with lyrics by Jan Kochanowski (16th c.), after Psalm 91.

230 From the account of Irena Norwa, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_033 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

into the camp draws them near, and intensifies them. This may also pertain to coerced labour – sometimes so much as to an equal degree. No access to clean water and no opportunity to be separated in order to enable psychologically safe performance of basic hygienic actions is such an instance of violated integrity.²³¹ Other such instances are dirt and filth, lice, and stench. All this obviously extends to men, but it appears more clearly and distinctly in the female accounts, proving furnished with certain other – or rather, some additional – meanings related to female sexuality. The following is an excerpt from a report of a female interviewee who first got to the camp and then to forced labour, as a girl, rather than a mature woman. Yet, the said meanings are legible in this piece as well:

It is hard to name, madam [*laughs*], I don't know whether this can be named that any conditions prevailed [there]. There was simply the entry to that *lager*, there were the bunks, three-deck ones. There was a blanket on each bunk, uncased, of course, stridently, of course, // dismally dirty. Well, and a pump, like, there was a single pump in the centre of, such a, square. On our way back from work, well, everyone had enough, didn't they, since from six in the morning till six in the evening, as I'm saying, it was autumn then already, so it was dark and cold, and rainy. We were fed up with all of [that]. As I'm saying, we got a slice of bread with marmalade and some piece of margarine, and some black coffee. And everyone there, sorry to say, would wash themselves with the right hand, for the water was cold, so it was hard to wash yourself otherwise. With the right hand in that, // by that well, or otherwise, you would carry for yourself, into [in] a bowl, some water into that room – I'm not sure how to name it, that. And you would collapse, sorry to say ..., like a log, on that bunk, in order to get up again at five in the morning. For it was some five kilometres [away]. You had to walk with those clogs on. Well, then you can figure out what sort of a walk that was. Before you reached the factory, before you clocked in and started your work at six o'clock. // Well, then, // what I'm saying is that only a strong man could bear that. A little human like me, thirteen-years-old, was not capable of getting, // of managing this, those duties of twelve-hour work[ing day], that *pyza* single [a dumpling that the

231 Cutting the hair also belongs here, though it did not appear with this particular Warsaw transport of women to Mauthausen. Even such routine action, which extended to the males as well, bears a perceptible attempt on the identity, corporal and psychological integrity. This violation occurs on a symbolic level. The haircutting motif appears in many accounts of former inmates, including female prisoners of Auschwitz or Ravensbrück. The meaning of the images of haircutting, loss of the hair, reaches beyond the one of similar images recalled by male interviewees. While concerning, in objective terms, the same action carried out on them, the experiences implied by it are different. For more on this point, cf. H. Amesberger, K. Auer, Brigitte Halbmayer, op. cit. – in particular, the subchapter *Haare* [*The hair*], pp. 80 ff.

factory's female workers were given for their lunch on regular basis], and that slice of bread with marmalade. I was constantly, constantly hungry, wasn't I. ... *Lager 80 Steyr*. This was its name. ...

And then, when I was sweeping, I only thought of not getting those blisters cracked, for I was going mad with the pain.²³²

One of our interviewees turned up at Mauthausen as an adult woman: she was twenty-three. Her lot was untypical – shortly after going through the passage/entry ritual she got engaged as a nurse or paramedic to care for the other women from the Warsaw transport:

And they announced thus: that if anyone has any sanitary training behind her, that she respond. Well, so I had this, so I responded. Some seven women of us applied. And they organised, like, a tent, as if an outpatient clinic. They told us that what the Germans were after was not to cure, to help, only that the Germans feared, for that was a transport from the rising, so that there was no epidemic of something, you know. And we, and them, turned it so that we rescued. I had a task, like, that I walked around the camp, for I was apparently dressed as a nurse, 'cause I was allowed to walk in this way, so, // and we were picking out the women who were ill, or wounded, injured from the time of the rising.²³³

Self-identification with a role like this offered a completely different field of observation than the one women remaining all the time at the tent camp, passively waiting for further resolutions, might have had. The most important of those observations, if the eagerness with which it is evoked can serve as a measure of such importance, concern instances of psychological infringement of sexual integrity, of violation of the sphere of intimacy or, at times, violence 'as such'. Let me quote the following, somewhat lengthy, excerpt:

It was known that, // that they took certain women to, // to do some experiments with. It was known that certain ones went away to Ravensbrück. I know that someone – I don't know [how] many, // two or three were guilty of something and, it seems, they were, // they got to the gas chamber. But this is what I don't know exactly. // [AK, the interviewer:] And those ones who were sick, and the sickness could not be concealed: what was happening to them? // Well, you know, madam, we tried to hide [that]. And once they were back at those barracks, then, as then, as there were the storied beds, then they would lie down on that lower bed and the others sat here and pretended to talk. And those ones were in the rear, behind them. So that no one

232 From the account of Irena Rowińska, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_165 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichočka).

233 From the account of Alina Krajewska, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_002 (recorded by Agnieszka Knyt).

recognised them, that they had anything done [to them]. So, this was like it. And then, when, let's say, [anyone of them] was on her way back from that, then someone else would walk with her too. They'd walk like this, as if both, that they talked, so that nobody paid attention that she was there with us. Then, on this side, that's what I know, what it looked like, but how they were sitting there, well, that's what I really know little of. Yea, for I was very busy. I was walking, searching for those, // for some feared to own it. 'Cause they had a fear. Well, then you had to somehow help them out in that, so that they decided to move. For some feared that they could be recognised, that they, // there was something not quite all-right with them. Well, and those doctors said that if the Germans detect [this], then they'll take [them] away and, to the, // won't allow to do anything like that. 'Cause they've been sent over just to prevent an epidemic. They were to disinfect everything, so that there was no rising-implied epidemic. That the people, those from the rising, brought something along with them. Then, they'd sprinkle around, various things like that were being done. So that, as to avoid, as if, // and what we were doing was done, like, discreetly.

[AK:] Were the people cured officially? // Officially, not. They weren't cured officially. This was done, like, discreetly; unnoticeably. Why, but some of those women needed to be aided. You know, madam, there were also many violated during the rising. I don't know when it was, in what a way this was occurring, but there were such that were torn up, even; bleeding. Then, it was very hard to remedy any like thing. // [AK:] Were the women abused? // Yes, they were. That, at once [*tapping on the tabletop*], at the beginning. As they stripped us naked, then, already there, and then, // the Germans picked up the women for themselves. And they were [abused] there, weren't they. // [AK:] And were there any cases happening that, for instance, a woman tried to defend herself against something like this? Was it possible at all then? // Well, there, // there, it was not possible. Once they took her there, well, then she was sitting in that room, well, and, // if she'd said "no", then, [she] would've been [taken] to the gas chamber, eh? No one would've, with her, // he would find another one for him, yeah? In turn, there were some violated ones who didn't want to quite admit it. But, for instance, I, some time, being in the lavatory, for beside me, I could see everything, // they were horribly made, // they didn't even want to admit that. So, this sometime in the course of the rising, don't know; as it was hard to get to know something from them. For there was fear, in fact, that what'd I say to the other one, so it wouldn't do me harm, yeah? So, there was rather nothing like, some, conversation. Well, between us, those nurses, we then were talking of what we're doing.²³⁴

In my initial, distinctive reading of the autobiographical stories of former female inmates of Mauthausen, I should like to pause at one more moment, appearing very distinct. What I have in mind is the recollection of liberation, getting freed from the obligation to do forced labour (as we have seen, this did not always stand for an actual instant termination of work performed in a given place); and,

234 Ibidem.

the reminiscence of the first weeks of freedom and the way back home – or, the way in a direction other than home.

This moment is distinct in a twofold manner. Identically as with the male accounts, it forms an important biographical breakthrough – an entry into different, non-camp experiences (as we saw it before, ‘different’ in this case does not imply ‘freedom from suffering/coercion’, non-trajectorial). As completely opposed to the interviews with males, this time is marked in female reminiscences with the opening of new threats, new perils and with the activation of their accompanying dreads or awes. These threats and fears are set in the presently analysed dimension of female experience of the camp or, as a broader concept, female experience of (the) war. They pertain to their sexuality, psychophysical integrity – the most delicate and the strongest protected sphere in a human. It is no surprise, then, that its violation is so solidly anchored in the autobiographical memory, and in the identity.

Well, and then an ordeal began again for the people, // for the women chiefly, being just then in the camps, // in the camp. Even for us too. You had really to request being shut, as these are the first troops which were, // couldn’t discern between a Polish and a German woman.

When it came to the next meeting, a few weeks later, the reminiscence of that particular moment had grown denser, with a little help from the interviewer asking the questions.

Well, those are the first, unfortunately, those first troops, of which I didn’t know, madam. That’s luck. Aha! They ceased shutting us up. At once. The wicket there was opened, // there was. There, it’s known that the women were. And those first American troops as well, they saw the *Gasthaus*, then they came into our place, too. And I was dressed by my mother in a kerchief on my head, and she told me to go to bed upstairs, hide my hair. she dressed me like a babushka of sorts, so that me, there, // for those too were such troops which could, it was said, draw from the beds Austrian women as well, also. This is what happened sometimes.

[MKC:] And were any such occurrences ever happening in Braunau alone?²³⁵ // Not in our *lager*, I mean, there was a situation that upstairs somewhere, in some room, about which I didn’t even know, // if some Austrian woman hid herself there, // and that, they said, was an actress. Upstairs. And she was found, dragged out by a military man, some American, and well, she resisted strongly, then he, madam, pricked her with a dagger or something, on the bottom. Into her buttock, thus he put the dagger. She even came over to us, seeking help. But there, upstairs, she must’ve hidden away

235 The small town of Braunau on the Austrian-German border was Adolf Hitler’s birthplace. The narrator worked at a local brewery and later on, in a Mann weaponry plant.

on her own. That // amid the Polish women. He husked her out there, I think. She did not go up there then, upstairs, as the blood was being spilled. Someone bandaged her there. But next, somehow like, I don't know if those were shut after that yet, // I think, yes, they'd shut probably for the night later on. But this is what you couldn't [do], as they ordered to open. There were scarce men there. ... // [MKC:] That is to say, there was nobody to defend you, the ladies. // No, why, how come? // [MKC:] But I understand that, beside this, it didn't go as far as...? // No, no, no. There were no like bad incidents. Well, once they learned that Poles were there, they evaded Polish women, // then they'd evade this, even. They husked out, rather, those // Austrian women.²³⁶

That fear of getting 'husked out' and the sexual violence (in the broad sense, as mentioned before) forms a reappearing experience in the autobiographical narrative of women 'liberated' in concentration camps (and, in their native localities as well), women expelled or 'evacuated' as part of post-war resettlements.²³⁷ Moments before, those women were on different sides of the warfront. The fragment quoted above is by no means representative; instead, it is a sign, a call slogan for the everyday common fears of women, which, in this sense, were ordinary at that time.

All those hitherto-discussed female experiences based on and/or related to and/or associated with the camp have impressed a deep traumatic mark or stigma in the memory, identity and psyche of the women surviving Mauthausen. My wish is that the words of Mauthausen survivors I am about to quote, as the last citation in this chapter, may remind one that the camp's aftermath included physical mutilations. These include, if this is the right way to put it, the fundamental and deepest mutilations.

And the most important thing my mother had was something which was an unlikely matter. My mother had, such, two abscesses on her nipples, that you'd place a bowl in front of it, and she, // there was something flowing out of her, from those two nipples. [This was so for] nine months. She was treated, the family provided for us then. She underwent treatment wherever it was possible, with all the doctors. At last, she came across a doctor, gynaecologist, who found one thing: that we must've been getting some things that hindered, // in the food, over the entire period of stay, maybe not in this camp, maybe it already started when in the camp, which had an influence on the hormonal courses. He was not able to treat it yet, but said it was as if she were walking

236 From the account of Irena Norwa, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_033 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

237 At this point, I can refer to the experiences of my KARTA Centre colleagues, and my own experience gained while recording the interviews with females: former Nazi concentration camp inmates, forced labourers, German women inhabiting until 1945 what is today the Polish territory, liberated by the Red Army. A strong fear of breach of sexual integrity, which usually was the fear of rape, during the anomaly period in the earliest post-war years, appears as a constant motif in those stories.

around pregnant, nine months. And I had my process obstructed also, of the menstruation. I didn't get [it]. Didn't get [it], // at all, // everything had come to a stop; owing to my stay there. There, I had something like a holdback, // there was a hampering. And my mother had her breast non-healing [for] nine months. It all ended after the nine months. It closed up and stopped suppurating, and that was it. So, this is like as if she had nine months of that, some sort of, illness, isn't it so. Mom says, 'Listen, [this was] like I'd walk around pregnant for nine months'. Then, she got steadier in that illn-..., // in that pain. In that psychical and physical pain, and she went to work.²³⁸

And, lastly, a fragment follows of another account, with the interviewer trying to understand a story – which she found seemingly incoherent – of looking after the 'grandchildren', their upbringing and playing with them. It appeared that the attempt to clarify this incoherence, 'illogicality' has unveiled a scar left over from a deep injury, a physical and psychical mutilation:

[AK, the interviewer:] Do you have any children, you and your husband? // No, we didn't have any children. No, you know. You know, in the camp, something... was given to the women. We had no... And then, the unbelievable troubles. [*Tape ends; the talk is resumed, on "grandchildren" now, with the narrator's husband participating.*]

[AK:] You have mentioned the camp. 'Cause I should like to resume this point, to find out still: You said, the women were getting something? // Yes, so we didn't, // we got no period, so, [there was] something, // something that must have been added in the food, that we weren't getting then. Well, and afterwards, after the war, I was personally getting much trouble. A Polish physician, such one, said I need to have removed, // after all, I had my diabetes then already. And, in those times, women with diabetes then, didn't, // didn't deliver babies, as this was almost impossible. It is different today. Today, they can have children. This is why we have none, only such ones do we have, // I am the only daughter, never had any brother or any sister. But my husband comes from a fairly large family. And there it is, his sisters' grandchildren, great-grandchildren, then, we, you know...²³⁹

* * *

This 'female excerpt' would probably have been different if it had been me interviewing the three ladies (or at least one of them). I would perhaps have understood more, but maybe I would be getting even more doubts, including ethical – about whether, and what namely, I should/am allowed to shed light on within those accounts; what to draw out of them. Beside this, the accounts

238 From the account of Irena Norwa, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_033 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

239 From the account of Alina Krajewska, available at the Oral History Archive, OK/DSH, ref. no. MSDP_002 (recorded by Agnieszka Knyt).

themselves would have been different. This is not to say that I have not recorded any interviews with female prisoners of Nazi concentration camps: on the contrary, I have, and am positive that a number of observations I made on those occasions now help me read/listen, and to better understand these female stories. I have decided to herein consistently subject to analysis the accounts of Mauthausen survivors, so they could be related to the same social space, the same camp universe. This 'external' limitation allows, I believe, for the more reliable extraction of the diversity of the camp experiences and the complexity and multidimensional nature of the social world of this specific concentration camp. My intention was to give the floor to the forgotten female inmates of Mauthausen, approaching their reports as testimonies – not so much as historical facts as, rather, a fading memory which we have managed to make a 'last-minute' record of. That these former inmates are forsaken now, be it in comparison with their Auschwitz or Ravensbrück 'peers', is what I have no doubt about, as I have already specified it.

To conclude, I owe a word of explanation, clarification, apposition and more personal afterthought.

On evoking in this chapter the numerous images from autobiographical narratives of the former female inmates of Mauthausen, as recorded by my female colleagues (it being extremely important that women talked to other women then), I endeavoured to reduce my comments to a minimum – as a deliberate decision. The doubt however remains whether the decision is satisfactory. To what extent am I, or can I at all be, reliable while speaking of the specificity of female experience? Being a male, to what extent am I capable of grasping it at all, and render it at all comprehensible to others? Even if I endeavour to do this chiefly through quotations, it is me that makes a selection and sets them in an order (while rejecting some others). The point is, I cannot give a good answer to these questions and I do not think I would ever be able to. I am not the one to evaluate my doings in this area – female readers of the above pieces of analysis are the right persons to talk to.

The issue would probably be much simpler if I confined myself to describing the historical experience of the group of Mauthausen inmates of my present interest, building a narrative on them similar to those usually constructed by historians who tend to synthetically outline the various categories of inmates: Polish, Russian, Spanish, Jewish, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, etc., viewing their objects through reversed binoculars, at a distance – a cold distance, without too many close-ups on concrete individuals. What I have decided to embark on is a completely different, riskier narrative strategy. Now, how do I defend it, given so many arising doubts?

I have one important argument to defend my position, or rather, there are several arguments which, I think, can conclusively be boiled down to a single one. I have namely proposed an excursus or initial reconnaissance here in order to unveil the female camp narrations, in their function as narratives of the womanly experience of being enclosed in a Nazi concentration camp, rather than,

simply, as female camp narrations – this being a subtle but very basic differentiation. The point is to try and read them in a different way; to read deeper into these testimonies. Should this attempt encourage others to embark on such interpretations, this ‘female excursus’ does make sense. The interviews with female Mauthausen prisoners I have evoked here, analysed in a tentative and selective manner, are available in the form of audio/video recordings and/or transcripts, remaining open to subsequent interpretations and research done by scholars of either sex.

Part III: Case studies

I. Leon Ceglarz

The first account I would like to discuss at length in this section is the autobiographical story of Leon Ceglarz, video-recorded as part of the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project. Mr Ceglarz was a long-term inmate of Nazi concentration camps – Gusen, Mauthausen’s main subcamp, in the first instance. His biography was also orally narrated: the autobiography represents the first example of this type, as I have discerned it, to have been used by the Interviewees to inscribe their concentration camp experience into the life histories that they themselves preserve, in their autobiographical memory and in the narratives they construct. Such a presence in the memory and in the narrative takes us further along and deeper into identity.

Leon Ceglarz, my Interviewee, was born in Plock in 1914 and spent his childhood there. For the first few years of his life, he was raised mainly by his mother, who was a housewife; his father served with the Russian Army during World War I and then fought in the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1920. When recalling his childhood and later years, Leon emphasised the importance of two values he had been imbued with: patriotism, and religious (Catholic) faith. Very active from childhood with a scouting organisation and service as an altar boy, he recalls poverty, and even hunger, over and over again – a recurring motif in this first stage of his biography. Evoked at the very outset of his biographical story, famine is used a metaphor for his entire life:

If I was willing to tell the story of this [= my] life, then I would say this to you: my life has turned full circle. For I already knew, by the time of the war, what hunger, dysentery were. ... And I experienced famine in that later time too, during the period of my stay at the concentration camp in Dachau, Mauthausen-Gusen; and there was Dzialdowo, the prison, before then. ... That was my second hunger, in a sense. And, paradoxically enough, now that I can eat, eat anything, I just cannot, ‘cause I am sick, the camp and my camp experiences, all those stories that got entwined at the camp ... have made of me a disabled war veteran, and, well, my age has only added to those experiences of mine, to this loss of my health, added its own share.

Leon passed his high-school exit exam and later completed a course at a teacher training college, after which he was employed as a teacher at a village school. He fought in the September 1939 Campaign. Spring 1940 saw him arrested as part of the so-called preventive action against Polish intellectuals, known as the AB-Aktion, and he was imprisoned in a concentration camp. He was first sent to Dachau. After being quarantined for a several weeks, he was moved to Gusen, the largest subcamp of Mauthausen, sometimes called the *Vernichtungslager für polnische Intelligenz*, the ‘annihilation camp for the Polish intelligentsia’, whose members were the largest group of inmates at that time. He lived in the camp for

five years, until he was liberated on 5th May 1945. After the war, he worked as a teacher in Plock, where he reactivated the local scout movement. During the Stalinist period, the authorities placed obstacles in his way so as to prevent him from completing his studies; he was dismissed as a school headmaster, forced to retire and assigned a job in the small town of Błonie near Warsaw. The Thaw of 1956 allowed him to be promoted to the post of headmaster there. He remained in this post until he retired in 1972, and eventually died in that provincial town. The visiting card I was handed describes him – beneath his first name and surname and next to the imprint featuring his military decorations and camp prisoner symbol – as a “Veteran of the Combat for Independence of the Republic of Poland, Soldier of September 1939, Major of the P[olish] A[rmy] (ret.), Stmr. [Scoutmaster] of ZHP [abbr., the Polish Scouting Association], Prisoner of the DACHAU, MAUTHAUSEN-GUSEN Concentration Camp[s]”.

Leon Ceglarz’s autobiographical account consists of two parts, running for about four hours each, and has been video-recorded in its entirety (each of the meetings lasted about six or seven hours). The first recording was made in January 2003 and the other over a month later, both at Mr Ceglarz’s house in Błonie.²⁴⁰

On introducing himself, as the very first words of his account, my Interviewee gives his first name and surname, adding:

Born in Plock, the ancient fortress town, on 1st February 1914. The third child in our family. My father had joined the war.

None of these additional pieces of information appears casually, each carries guidelines of special importance for the interpretation of the entire testimony, or, at least, its first part, which concerns the pre-war years: a large family without a father whose absence is peculiar as he has joined the army at the war front. We learn all this from the very first sentence, as it is of importance for the Interviewee’s identity. Even the side remark of ‘the ancient fortress town’ is not a casual comment: expressed with a serious intent, it may herald a certain method by which the biographical story is constructed – by being made part of a supra-individual historical narrative.

As I asked him to tell the story of his life – the intention being to initiate the first part of an interview/account, an unrestrained biographical story uninterrupted by questions – Leon responded by referring to the whole narrative that he was about to build:

Oh, my beloved God... As my date of birth tells you, I have lived a rather long life. Never in a straight line, full of various turns, but as is usual with old age, you tend to remember the strange things better.

240 The KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive has these recordings archived in DVD-ROM and CD-ROM format, ref. no. MSDP_138.

This is how, be it unconsciously, he marks the difference between the reality of future occurrences (his biography), what the memory is capable of evoking, and what it is today (an autobiography).

And here is where the essential biographical story starts, to run for a number of hours. Its first part, more than any of the following parts, is characterised by the incessant interpenetration of solidified (and, probably, processed) images from his individual memory with those of his family memory and pieces of knowledge about the vicissitudes undergone by his family and himself, taken from certain other sources. This borderline between his own memory of the past, on the one hand, and the family message plus knowledge of the past, on the other, is at times clearly marked at the moment it is crossed: “I learned of the details at a later date”; “I learned about it only later, when my father sent a letter to my mother”; “what I’m telling you right now, it comes from what I learned at a later time”. More frequently, however, his individual memory, the family message, and knowledge of important events for his biography, tend to reciprocally penetrate one another to the extent that the boundaries between them become completely blurred – not to be reconstructed, even for the narrator himself. But there is no need to try and identify them, since all these aspects seem to be mutually equivalent; they build a narrative of Leon’s childhood, or – on an equal footing – the period preceding it:

In the late 19th century, my father was arrested for his independence activities, I mean, taken away and dispatched *v soldati* [Russ. = taken forcibly to the army], as was customary at that time. His brother Teofil was taken away and deported to Siberia, from where he never returned. ... The family must have been ... well educated, by the standards of the time, ... by the period’s measure. I recall my father, and... I’m of the opinion that he is, or rather, was, a very brave man. And a wise man. ... I would compare him ... to Andrzej Radek from Żeromski’s *Szyfowe prace*²⁴¹ ... His was a peasant family. He was also distinct among his peers, as he had completed some Russian school, in the Russian language, naturally. He must have excelled, as he became, later on, after graduation, a so-called scribe – a typical one, like the one shown by Żeromski. And, later, he went to Kielce, or Radom. ... to join a teaching seminary [i.e. teacher training college]. Just like the Radek guy, he wandered there at one point, just like you read in your *Szyfowe prace*, to Kielce he did go...

This powerful comparison of the vicissitudes of his father with the fortunes of a literary character – a very important one for my Interviewee, as it will turn out – suggests certain crucial interpretative guidelines. The lot of his family becomes inscribed in the universal lot of the generation of the Polish intelligentsia of the

241 Stefan Żeromski, 1864–1925, was a major figure among Polish early-20th-century fiction authors. His novel *Szyfowe prace* [‘Sisyphean Labours’], based on autobiographical material, deals with the maturation of Polish youth under the Partition and their resistance against the Russification policies pursued by Russia, one of the partitioning Powers.

late 19th and early 20th century: as with Leon's father, part of their experience was Poland's regained independence in 1918. Through such a strong, emotion-imbued identification, it also forms a material fragment of my Interviewee's biographical story – although it refers to events that he cannot remember from his personal experience. The literature evoked by the narrator and the way he evokes it are indicative of the values of the intelligentsia's ethos, or a certain version of it, with which he himself identifies.

The narrative concerning the first years of his life is dominated by several recurring motifs, probably of importance for his self-image or, to put it more emphatically, for the identity of the storyteller. One of these motifs is the absence of the father who serves in the Tsarist army, joins the military to fight in World War I and subsequently, wearing the Polish uniform, in the Polish-Bolshevik war. This motif interferes with the recurring subject of poverty and hunger, and with the image of the mother who struggles, unaided, with the hardships related to supporting a family and raising the children:

And later on, those later years were of the kind that... // My father was in the war, the three of us, the kids, were in Płock, our mother's dependants. Those years were very, very hard for me, and for the whole family. I cannot even talk about this subject, for it instantly comes back to my mind ... // that extremely hard period. ... That I survived this, I probably owe it to my mother, and to an extent perhaps – even certainly so – to Divine Providence, that our mother successfully coped with those three children... ... My mother was left without any means of subsistence, but she saved my life in that period of poverty, hunger...

The video recording of this particular moment of the interview expresses far more than a transcript can reveal. We can see that having to recall things prevents his verbal expression, triggering strong emotions and agitation, and bringing a lump to his throat. A moment later comes an image of his mother collecting dry twigs in the forest; this is also accompanied by strong affection:

I can remember my mother walking, with the other women, to the forest, ... which was a few kilometres [away]. She would cross a wooden bridge. And my mother, to gain a few zloty – well, I don't know what the money [currency] was then; // marks, I should think; // there were marks, and there were roubles... No, roubles... So that she could sell those branches she had carried, and buy us something to eat. And the three of us were sitting, waiting for our mother. ... I can remember those days, I recall them and find that my mother was a very resourceful woman, and she wouldn't let me die.

The return of his father after World War I is an essential, symbolic moment in Leon Ceglarz's autobiography – making all the stronger an impression in his memory given that was his first meeting with his father. Moreover, the presence of his father marks a new stage in the storyteller's biography. To what extent such a new stage really opened at that time for a four- or five-year-old boy or whether it has become so in his memory and self-narration, we cannot tell. Again, the words spoken through tears are difficult to render in writing:

He [the Rev. Lasocki, a priest in Plock – (PF's note)] ran that nursery for the poorest children. And all three of us, we actually formed part of the group. ... I was taking my first steps and writing my first characters. Using a scribe of sorts on a graphite board, without a copybook. And, one fine day, my sister rushes in, 'Dad's here!' ... Together, all three of us, came along and saw this dad. For I had never seen our father. 'Cause my father... // I was born, and my father was arrested straight after; // he had been arrested before then, he was in the army, came to see us still then, on leave, but the war broke out and they put him in the ranks of the Russian Army, unfortunately. ... At that point, my father accepted an appointment... it turned out the better for us. There was no hunger, in any case. Mother could buy some food for us, bread, have us dressed somehow. We of course still used to walk barefoot, for a long time.

An important socialisation experience of that period was the start of his education at a two-grade 'common' (elementary) school. This was a new, still rather provisional Polish school, attended by children of various ages and diverse knowledge levels. Leon was among the youngest and, in his own words, most diligent pupils. His memory has preserved a resonant image:

The two grades were located not far from our flat in Płońska Street. I lived [at] number 5, Płońska St., and further up, number 7, was a, sort of, nice brick house, and the two grades ... I got to that younger grade, of the Rybiński man, and was taking my first steps as a pupil there. The second grade, run by the other teacher, was joined by children whose school age was far above those grades. Those were, sort of, well-grown ones, big ones – my sister, almost four years my elder, and those of her age. ... Well, and I studied diligently. I can remember a little anecdote: the teacher who taught those older boys... and the girls. As usual with older students, they found learning rather dull. ... And he [once] sent such a dunce to our class, and I was called by the teacher who taught [them] to show that ignoramus how to spell the 'rz', with 'r-and-z' and just with the 'z' [some of the tricky rules of Polish spelling]. And he dictated a sentence to me, which I can remember until now: "I won't believe that the brick-maker [ceglarz, in Polish] could build the top of this tower!" I wrote this down without an error. No error – seems to me, I put 'the brick-maker' [ceglarz] with a small letter, but those 'z's', 'r-and-z's'... 'Well, see?', the teacher says, 'a youngster so small knows it even better, can write it better than you!' I was small indeed: a blond boy with my hair curled, a typical, flaxen sort of hair, wearing slacks of some kind... // This is my image of myself – my mother never told me about any of it.

While there is little doubt that such an anecdote was based on fact, the opposition 'dunce'/'diligent student' is arguably a construct made up at a later date, serving well the interpretation of this incident. Just as the whole incident – one of the many that took place at the school, and one of the very few so precisely remembered – has its special place and role to play in the speaker's autobiography. The above-quoted fragment, moreover, is clear testimony of the process of constructing, rather than reconstructing, a self-centred narration. The talking person, remembering some fragments of real past events, uses them to compose a

story, weave a plot, outline the characters – including himself: “This is my image of myself”. He probably even has some fun with this creative, rather than recreative, effort.²⁴²

The Polish-Bolshevik war of 1920 is the next essential element in this autobiography (although it must have been an earlier moment in Leon’s biography, since he was six at that time). Leon’s father was conscripted again – now, obviously, with the Polish Army. A recollection of a direct encounter with a Russian soldier magnifies the strongly-consolidated stereotype of the Bolshevik – once again unverifiable since there is no event to appeal to, save for the Interviewee’s own memory:

The year '20 came, my father went to the war again, again he left us on our own. I can remember the year '20... can remember it quite well.

There follows a brief description of the course of the hostilities in the vicinity of Płock – based on the speaker’s later knowledge and deliberately evoked by it (rather than by the biographical memory ‘proper’). The event that follows belongs, for a change, to the area of direct experience:

Whereas I can remember the first Bolshevik [I met]; // we lived in a garret of sorts, in Płońska St.; // some ragamuffin broke in, just like that; // Is it a soldier? Or is it... Who’s this? I just can’t, till this day... // What I know is that it was some very abject character, who tugged at my mother, forcing her to open the wedding chest. In the earlier days, they were coffers, where all the things of value could be kept... clothing... and the like. He tugged at her, and the three of us clung to our mother’s frock: ‘Don’t you touch her! Don’t beat our mother!’ They were, I should think, not allowed to do so, he was taking a sort of liberty. So, he smashed the lock with the butt of his rifle... And he took what he could take from there... What sort of belongings could such a poor family like mine have. He took some rags, and ran down the stairs as fast as possible.

This early childhood experience – contact with an alien, an enemy – was of importance for the formation of the storyteller’s own, socially-shaped national identity. Remembered in this way, it could have strengthened the attitude of (declared) dislike toward the political system prevailing in Poland after World War II. And,

242 If my understanding is correct, this was N. Denzin’s view of autobiographical narrations. As he says in his *Interpretive Biography*, already quoted: “Here is a dilemma. There are only interpretations, and all that people tell are self-stories. The sociologist’s task cannot be one of determining the difference between true and false stories. All stories, as argued earlier, are fictions. The sociologist’s task, then, involves studying how persons and their groups culturally produce warrantable self and personal-experience stories which accord with their group’s standards of truth. We study how persons learn how to tell the stories which match a group’s understandings of what a story should look and sound like. It seems that little more can or needs to be said on this matter” (p. 77).

conversely, this latter dislike reinforced the image that was shaped of a distant situation, thus fusing the real occurrence with its interpretation.

The subsequent stage of Leon Ceglarz's pre-war biography is reported in terms of his continued education and, more broadly, socialisation. Religious faith was a very important element: imbued in him, especially in his early childhood, by his mother ("My mother was a very, very religious person, she brought me up in the spirit of respect for God, for people..."), then by the aforesaid nursery – a charity institution run by the local prelate – and, lastly, by his altar service. This latter experience occupies an important (and extensive) place in my Interviewee's narrative:

I was a very, very devoted boy then. I haven't yet said that I was an altar boy when at primary school – since I came from a religious home. I began my instruction as an altar boy at the Plock Cathedral. ... I can recite the altar service in Latin to this day. [It] enchanted me and I so much regretted it that I was not in that theological seminary; that I was not one of those priests. The very ceremonial enchanted me. Magnificent. Those songs, the choir that was singing, performing. The rite, there was Archbishop Nowowiejski at that time. And, the very process of serving mass, once I was admitted. ... Those grand ceremonies, the grand procession of canons, prelates, dressed in those robes, not just canonicals, but with the great tails, held like a... // You can sometimes see Roman tribunes... This is something... // There was such similarity.

What can we actually read in these few incoherent sentences? Do they describe the state of boyish enchantment with the ecclesiastical ceremonial, at the time he experienced it? Are they evidence of an efficient socialisation into the Catholic faith and its religious practices, fully internalised long ago, and approached as the speaker's own? Or, do they, rather, attest to his longing for a lost childhood, which moments before had been depicted in the gloomy colours of poverty and hunger? Or, perhaps, it was the contrast between his own indigence and the splendour and sublimity of the ceremonial that enabled it to exert so lasting an impression in my Interviewee's memory? Whilst these questions are not mutually exclusive, it is certainly easier to find the answers if we, again, step beyond the limits of the text itself, and take a closer glance at the video recording. The storyteller's sudden invigoration, the accelerated pace of his narration, the fact that this particular fragment is made dense with detailed images, as if it had been suddenly freed from memory, and his expressive gestures completely reduce the distance with the story being told. Later, some digressions are made so as to contrast that idealised reality against today's reality (extensive criticism of the reformed, simplified, and less sublimely celebrated Catholic liturgy of today: "I don't quite like it..."): all this prompts us towards something of importance, suggesting new interpretative options, reinforcing or weakening what we can read from the text. Given the whole context, it becomes even more apparent that this fragment of the interview, still an early one, is used by Mr Ceglarz to display the constitutive elements of his own identity, those which are of essence to him. We cannot tell for sure how important or essential they were during the bygone events this Interviewee

evokes, but they are certainly of essence today, for him to construct his autobiography, for imbuing meaning into the biographical events. In this case, the point is to provide the grounds for a strong religious faith, and to confirm (including for Leon himself) its enduring and continual character.

His religious activities signified the first biographical crossroads he faced as a child. Actually, he was placed there by his parents, with their vision of their child's future and also their own (primarily, financial) potential. This is the picture recorded in his memory:

I was to be a priest. My mum absolutely wanted me to be a priest. And I wanted it too. But my father set as the task for himself to have us, all three, educated somehow. He had a job himself. My mum had sort of, a few, lordly airs, so to speak: she would never put on a headscarf, although she would go out to fetch wood, but that was when she had to. But then, she'd revive. So, my sister went to a secondary commercial school ..., and my elder brother went to a 'Władysław Krzywousty'²⁴³ teacher training seminary ..., and, well, I was completing my primary school. ... Having finished my sixth grade, I wanted to be, // to go to the theological seminary. ... I didn't go to the theological seminary, for, as I said, my third brother was born, our father was the only one working... Besides, his views were a little, a little leftist... PPS-like ones, to be sure [i.e. as advocated by/associated with the Polish Socialist Party] – this being an interesting fragment of my father's life as well. Namely, a layette had to be given there, that means, everything which was needed to... // for a young cleric or high-school graduate like this... // for one who studied there, fifty zloty for tuition, that was very expensive, given the times. At the teachers' seminary, we, using [the opportunity] that our family was large... // paid twenty-five zloty [of the fee]. That was fifty zloty in total, for I also joined that teachers' seminary later on, when I failed to get into the theological seminary. But the fondness, and the faith implanted in me by my mother, lasted inside me.

Characteristically, his father's PPS-inclined leftist orientation in the pre-war period is only mentioned once, and somehow marginally, in passing. The related 'interesting fragment' of this man's life is only remarked upon: it remains generalised and instantly peters out, never to be deepened, developed, or given in any detail whatsoever. In contrast, the religiosity of his mother recurs on many occasions, recalled with affection. A legitimate question can be asked: why is the religious worldview of his mother so strongly exposed in this biographical narrative (and memory), while the father's leftist views are barely mentioned? Perhaps my Interviewee's memory (which 'controls' his entire long life, including the years spent in communist Poland, a state based on 'leftism' – an element which Leon perceives as an enemy, and condemns) solidified the elements and constituents of his childhood even more strongly, to create an image of his self that fitted better.

243 Actually, Bolesław Krzywousty (Boleslaus III the Wry-mouthed), Prince of Poland (Transl. note).

Those elements that do not fit so well are viewed from a long distance, as if through a reversed telescope.

The crossroads that my Interviewee stood at in his teens was a situation he shared with a number of young people of his age, and some slightly younger and older members of his generation, who – if the circumstances were favourable – were to join the ranks of the provincial intelligentsia. To do a course of studies at a university, college or technological university was an unattainable prospect for many of them (and their families). It was easier, though still with much effort, for them to graduate from a local teachers' or theological seminary. Some managed to fulfil their (and their parents') more daring daydreams and complete a cadet school. These possibilities/limitations fixed, on the macro level, the scope of several key individual life choices that were made on the micro level – those of individual life strategies.

Apart from religious faith, involvement in the scout movement is the other strongly exposed component of my Interviewee's self-definition. Starting in his teens, this was to be a lifetime interest:

I was lucky to have met a second teacher He was a teacher who infected me with [love for] scouting. I was still a little tyke, I wouldn't have been allowed to join the scouts, as I wasn't fourteen yet. But I had already hung around there, he'd already taken me on excursions with the scouts. He, as well as Dorobek [the other teacher and scout, affectionately recollected by Leon – note by PF], instilled in me a love for nature, forests, fields ... So, those were the two fragments: scouting and the altar service.

It was only the former 'fragment' that remained, over time; as is apparent from the continuation of the story, though, it became the area where the values of the religious activities were cherished and tended to. His involvement with scouting remains Leon's dominant reminiscence from his junior high school years; it is dominant to the extent that the narrative contains almost no other images from this stage of the biography.

I devoted myself with my entire heart to scouting when at the teacher training seminary I am the only member of the Plock Scout Troop Command who is [still] alive... from that period, obviously, the period of the years '33, '34, '35. The only living one. ... Later, as a member of the Troop Command, I became familiar with the learning method, // with the scouting learning method as proposed by Aleksander Kamiński, who endeavoured to demonstrate it.²⁴⁴ ... I became interested in this... in that method. And, well, later on, as I was promoted in the scouting, I managed, // I set up a squad,

244 Aleksander Kamiński (1904–78), pedagogue, educator, scouting instructor, soldier with the Home Army, one of the commanders of the Szare Szeregi [Grey Ranks] – the Polish conspiratorial scouting organisation during the Nazi occupation.

named after Bartosz Głowacki.²⁴⁵ ... While in my last year, right before my high school finals, before the last exams... there was a course – the only one, a two-week course in Nierodzim, Silesia. ... It was the only course for teachers. I was not a teacher myself yet. ... My task was – as a delegate to that course, as a whiz, so to speak, in this business – to organise the cub scout movement in Płock and in the entire county. And I was the organiser of this... ... I was later at the Łódź convention – just to digress a little – that restored scouting after the war, according to the old methods. I was at that convention, as an old scouting instructor then already. But this is a different story. In any case, scouting has been my passion, which has survived till this day.

Again, the transcript is not able to show what can be seen and heard in the videotaped recording: how strongly stressed the word ‘passion’ is, the emphasis put on it. As if the narrator was willing to reconstruct therein some remnant of that youthful reality, that passion. The photographs preserved from the period of his service in pre-war scouting, showing my Interviewee among a group of younger scouts, which we looked at together after the recording was made, attest to the genuineness of those youthful emotions and reinforce the emotions of today, evoked by the memory of those past ones.

The subsequent stage in Leon’s biography, following his completion of the teacher training college, consisted of him making the first decisions about his life (a biographical action plan, to use the Schützean notion). Those decisions were taken within the confines of the narrow opportunities then available to him as a provincial teacher in the first half of the 1930s. The decisions that are seen in a flashback as individual ones constantly overlap with the ready-to-use and accepted institutional patterns that set the schemes of potential action (to refer to Schütz’s network of notions). These two interpenetrating biographical processes are often hard to separate in practice. This difficulty manifests itself in the following narrative fragment, which relates to the moment when Leon completed teaching college.

I actually was the scouting instructor to the end – till the very end, the moment I took my exams. And completed my teaching seminary. And I became a jobless teacher. No appointment. Unemployment. Just like it’s starting to be today. ... I was left without a job, and I was an adult man, wasn’t I. I topped up my income a little by tutoring. And there... I could even do quite well with it, there were days when I’d run around from one private lesson to another. And I did earn money, a bit. ... I got my first job, four hours of teaching, in history, as far as I can recall – I don’t really remember... But that was history, yes – in a private school, run by Szczecińska and Wiśniewska. ... There were children of the intelligentsia [attending], there were children of the various sirs, the doctors, judges, barristers, engineers... What could a teacher like me mean there?

245 Bartosz Głowacki (1758–94), Polish peasant, scythe-bearing recruit in the anti-Russian Kościuszko Insurrection of 1794, killed on the battlefield; in the 19th century, he became a symbolic figure as a peasant fighter for the country’s independence.

Not too much. But I managed. Because I gained a great esteem among those kids. I was the alpha and the omega for them. ... There I got those four hours. And it was there that I encountered the intelligentsia of Plock. Who, as for helping me, they wouldn't help me at all. Which is unpleasant, but... // To gain some extra work... // I later got a full-time job, also as a replacement – I commuted from Plock to a school in Poplacin. Poplacin, as you know, was a... What sort of a school was that? A hut covered with thatch, made of planks, on sand – where the sand, when the wind was blowing from the Vistula, would come into the classroom. I was commuting by bike.

'The intelligentsia of Plock' is an interesting detail in this fragment relating my Interviewee's very first experiences in his profession. This short description is accompanied by heterogeneous emotions: aspiring to membership of this group with a concurrent distant attitude towards it. This must indicate a trace of the real splits that existed within the apparently coherent provincial intelligentsia of the period.

1935 tends to be memorised in multiple biographical accounts of the members of Mr Ceglarz's generation whom I have talked to as the year of Józef Piłsudski's death. Regardless of their personal attitudes, this individual, as expressly recorded in the collective memory (as well as in some individual memories of the pre-war generation), serves as one of the essential keystones of Polish national identity. A characteristic, very specific image also appears in Leon's testimony:

In '35 I replaced a Polish teacher at the school in Dobrzyńska St., a girls school. I was known as a scout, and it was on this basis that I got the replacement position. Remunerated, of course. It wasn't much, but I was already getting [enough money] to meet my needs – I wasn't living off my father or mother anymore. ... I had a rehearsal with the girls, I was preparing some short play there. A female teacher runs in – it was the year 1935: "Marshal Piłsudski is dead!" The end of everything!

The 'end of everything' is a rhetorical device rather than the actual end of anything (apart from the school classes or rehearsals that were discontinued at that moment – but this is not what the narrator had in mind). Such a strongly emphasised exclamation conceals the emotions triggered by Piłsudski's death. An important event then, but apparently no less important today when it is being reported upon: the narrator has not distanced himself at all from the event and its accompanying emotions.

Another important socialisation experience was Leon's military service. This started a few months later, in 1935, and is now reported as a tough but extremely positive stage in his biography – precisely the period of socialisation. The military episode was an important lesson learned, in the context of his later experiences: training and practice that helped him survive the concentration camp. Such an interpretation is obviously possible only with this later perspective in mind. At this point, the narrative offers no comparison or direct reference to scouting. Yet, the military experience is not interpreted as what freed Leon from his concerns over his lack of permanent employment or his uncertain financial

situation. It could be conjectured, however, that the period of military service somehow negated those anxieties:

It's the year 1935. I'm to join the military! I was allocated to the Infantry Reserves Cadet School in Zambrów. It was a nationwide Infantry Reserves Cadet School. It was only there that I learned a lot, grew to be a man. And I did, I must admit, learn a great deal in the military.

The details he remembers from that stage of his biography, the names of the commanders, etc., in combination with the solemn, elevated, or even proud way in which these experiences are reported, testify to their essential place in my Interviewee's autobiography. Also of relevance to this placement is the positive valuation of public service, particularly military service, which was commonplace in pre-war Poland. Thus, this particular fragment of the story is strongly legitimised. Perhaps even more strongly anchored is the story of the fighting in the Defensive War of September 1939. Moreover, this story has probably been repeated several times and consolidated through narration – and is thus easy to repeat once again, requiring no effort of the memory. It suffices as the start to a well-trained story. This may be why the three years between his return from the army and the outbreak of World War II are reported on rather hastily and superficially, in spite of certain apparently important biographical events, Leon's marriage in particular:

Having returned [from the military, in autumn 1936 (PF's note)] I had problems getting a job assignment again. ... But I accepted a job with a school in Borowiczki, near Plock. And I worked there till the year 1938 Between January '39 and September – to 28th August, to be exact – I was in Potok [the locality of Biały-Potok in the county of Sanniki, where Mr Ceglarz was employed on a regular basis as a teacher – note by PF], as a teacher... For I had got married in the meantime. I married a young lady I liked. Not the one who wanted me to marry her. And, well... // She lived in Staroźreby, but moved with me to Potok, and there we had two rooms and a kitchen, in a hut.

This period is only remembered as a prologue to his wartime experiences. Marriage and setting up a family appear in this oral autobiography as simply an episode occurring in the background to the mainstream life story. This cannot be completely explained by the war and the powerful wartime biographical experiences. It is a characteristic feature of most of the male life (hi)stories I have recorded – the narrative mainstream flows from school-age experiences, through to those of the occupation and the camp, to the post-war professional experiences. Wife, children, family – this potentially closest circle often remains merely remarked upon, touched upon, in the unrestrained biographical story. Questions must be asked in order to redirect the memory of the Interviewees along these lines, which appear unobvious to them. This way of constructing the narrative can be explained in several ways, some of which may be complementary and mutually reinforcing: the fact that it is difficult to notice and express the closest things in one's own experience may be one such reason. The impression one gets is that wife, children, family home and ordinary everyday life are an 'unmanly' part of a biographical story,

unconsciously omitted (and perhaps more seldom consciously removed) in the accounts of individual experiences reported in the first person singular. Another possible interpretation is that the Interviewees tend to define the whole interview situation as one in which they are tasked with inscribing their own individual biographical story into a collective history (or, 'History') wherein they cannot see enough room for their daily, ordinary, private experiences.

The outbreak of the war comes as an event that animates the narration and renders it dense again. The several weeks of Leon's participation in the Defensive War occupies a disproportionately long fragment of his biographical story. This is also the moment at which certain chronologically earlier events and plans for life – made complicated, thwarted, or radically cut off by the war – are introduced into the story. The collective trajectory of the outbreak of the war forms the background for the individual trajectory.²⁴⁶

The war came. I, as a... // I was a Platoon Leader/Army Cadet in the year '39, I was to be appointed an officer, I had university [studies] arranged for me – History. I had reconciled that with my wife, there was no trouble with earning a living, we had no kids, she was working for the municipality, so there was no problem, I wanted to carry on with my education. Meanwhile, the war cut all that short. No officer's rank. To go to the war was a must... // A white mobilisation card. I turned up as assigned, on 28th August. // I was in Siedlce already, and collected my uniform allowance – very nice, all new pieces. ... I bid farewell to my wife, said goodbye to my mum, dad. And, well, I went away to join the war.

My Interviewee does his best to control his biographical narration in its entirety. He is aware that a more detailed reconstruction of his participation in the 1939 struggling could 'blow up' the story as a whole. So, he announces he would rather quit this thread:

I fought with that handful [of people] of mine. That would be a separate... two hours, separately, talking of my combat alone.

In spite of this reservation, he recalls quite a number of events, situations, and individuals from that period, all of which have 'stuck well in the memory', in his own words. This episode would not take two hours of talking, but the listener ought to know that it is particularly important and could run for a long time.

Still, the story told about the Defensive War of September 1939 is not being built – contrary to what could be expected and what happens not only in history textbooks but also in many a biographical story – with the use of a military language and categories such as patriotism, aggression/attack, combat/struggle in defence of the Homeland, heroism, martyrdom. The personal experiences of the

246 I use the term 'trajectory' throughout in the meaning accepted by biographical sociology, after A. Strauss, F. Schütze, and the Polish scholars, esp. A. Rokuszewska-Pawelek and K. Kaźmierska.

time make the narrator contrast, carefully enough, other images of those events as well:

I can't remember it well, I have it put down somewhere in my military-service book... In any case, from the instances of struggle, literally, struggle, where the bullets were whizzing past, canons banging, and I was firing, the machine gun was firing, I led my remnants of the battalion [*sic*] to attack the German positions – this is all true. I wouldn't say I was afraid, // that I was not afraid – that's not true. You only have to overcome your fear. ... I am leading forward. At one moment – I now have to tell you this detail – at one moment, I am on my own, and none of my soldiers are around: one's lying here, the other's there, another's over there. They hadn't been killed, but just took fright as I gave [the command], 'Fix bayonets!' ... We marched in the night. One might think that a soldier is someone one who does nothing at all but fighting. That's rubbish – he primarily marches, and he does so at night. ... How many collapsed and died out of that, this is what I wouldn't like to tell, as this is simply a shame. During the war, I never saw my company leader in person, ever. This is just to give an example.

The end of combat and the return home is reported in a similar way – through showing the individual ways of coping with the circumstances, finding emergency solutions, and getting out of trouble, flight. Sometimes, as in the present account, one flies from the two occupiers, as opposed to the image – preserved in the collective memory – of a surrendering army, the soldiers being taken prisoner of war, with their heads held high. A similar experience of the end of the struggle in September/October 1939 is common to many of its participants:

An encirclement was made, the [Lublin (PF's note)] Army surrendered. Captivity now! I didn't want to flee, // be taken prisoner. ... With two soldiers from my platoon. Between the army, // the positions of the Soviet Army and the German positions, circumnavigating there through the woods... I headed toward Węgrów. And I changed my clothes there. ... // And God the Lord guarded me, so I bypassed that post of theirs, standing over there on the very roadway, I bypassed the post standing by the village. ... I eventually reached Węgrów, having a variety of adventures [on the way], about which a lot could be said.

Finding an emergency solution has just been interpreted as an instance of Divine Providence that adds meaning to those occurrences, helps carry the burden of responsibility for the difficult decisions taken at the time – and enables those experiences to be integrated with the subsequent survival of several years' imprisonment in the *kaceta*.

Characteristic to my Interviewee's narrative is that the traces of daily life during the occupation are very vague. Leon's memory cannot really evoke any specific image from the period between his return home in October 1939 and his detention in April 1940 – as if it were completely overwhelmed by the distinctness of the extremely uncommon, specific and critical experiences. The ordinary has been lost to the extraordinary – the former becoming extremely comprehensive,

as it encompasses the birth of the Ceglarz's first child, an otherwise rather special event, which he now just mentions in passing. It seems that the explanation I have suggested above – those of the speaker's experiences classed as personal have been eclipsed – can be applied again.

I was back home in mid-October. I first returned to the village I had left the furniture in, and so on... It appeared that my father-in-law had managed to visit the place, and he took the furniture, all the pieces, with him. ... I returned to my house, my wife, wasted, shabby, lice-ridden. For I walked, wearing civilian clothes, 'cause across Warsaw, if the Germans could spot me, then they'd take me back. I went through Dobrzyków, that way – as you go toward Płock. And... there, I presented myself as a farmer. But my mates the teachers knew me. When a Gestapo-man visited the headmaster, // no, it was actually the military police visiting, // so he gave him a list of the teachers, he would enter me in that list. And, what could you do? The military policemen came over. ... My wife delivered a baby, the baby was four weeks old. ... I was arrested, tumbled with a cellar from a kick, and then pulled back out. I quoted my details and continued asserting that I was a *Landwirt*, and not a teacher.

After a break of a few minutes, which he had requested (almost two hours having passed since we started the recording), my Interviewee continued his biographical story, starting with a minute description of his arrest, imprisonment in Płock – together with other teachers of the region, registration procedure, beating, and stay in a transit camp arranged in the former barracks in Działdowo. These experiences mark the beginning of another biographical trajectory, different from the preceding one – much longer and more radical. This becomes clear on the language level: the first-person-singular narration has suddenly disappeared, and is now replaced by the collective subject of 'we' or, even more frequently, the participle or, at times, infinitive form. 'I', the individual subject, loses control over the reality and becomes subject to procedures, injunctions, commands, orders, and the like. The biographical narrative ceases describing the actions undertaken by the individual subject, becoming instead a description of the actions made to/on the subject. The latter is, usually, collective, which additionally stresses the oppressive and collective nature of the experiences being reported on.

With a kick, literally, a kick on a certain-part-of-the-body [i.e. the behind], into the cellar, down those steps – fortunately, there were not many [of them]. The other mates were there already. Well, and, you wait for the interrogation. The interrogation took place without a beating, but with much yelling. And, back again – then I was treated to a kick again – and, you wait till being transported. ... And, we were taken to Płock, to the prison in Płock ... There, no one was to handle us with kid gloves. ... We spent a little less than a week in that prison, something around a week. And, at one point, opened is the... // the cell door opens: '*Raus!* – Out!' Screaming, of course, that same brute who apparently was in charge, exactly, of those cells there. We were made to stand in a row. Our names checked. Two of those imprisoned were released – I can't remember their names, but they were not teachers. And, we went out, in front

of the prison gate. There stood a lorry, sort of, with a tarpaulin. ... We all didn't know [i.e. none of us knew] where we were going to go. It turned out that we were taken to Działdowo, to the old barracks there.

It instantly appears, though, that the aggression aimed at the entire, ad-hoc-formed group affects its members in an uneven way. There are many more such images from the period of the camp imprisonment to come:

I should like to say that the worst thing was our being driven to the toilet. The toilet: an ordinary pole and a ditch with faeces. There were elderly people. I was a young man, aged twenty-five, athletic, a scout, a soldier... and so forth. But there were elderly people, in turn, those landlords in particular. And all that had to be [done] at a run. Down the stairs, on the double. And there, between one floor and the other, // between one stairway and the other, there stood an *esman* [SS-man], *esmans* there already who battered with the butts as much as they could, // as much as they could manage.

The second, and no less detailed, instance of retrospection concerning his imprisonment at the concentration camp is preceded by a theoretical commentary that is situated beyond the facts-based narrative order:

What can I say about the camp? All that's the worst. And I, if I have survived the camp, like I wrote on one photograph there... If I were asked by someone, "How did you survive the camp?" I can tell you fragments: where I was, what *Kommando* I worked in, and so on... I'm going to tell you this in a moment – but I wouldn't be able to give an answer. And I should think, there's no one who could, whoever has spent so long a time at a concentration camp, like myself.

Again, it is fairly easy to overlook these sentences, if we were content with the text alone. Especially when, focused on the plot – that is, the content of the autobiography being told, its threads and episodes – we tend to briskly slip past the generalisations, arguments, interpretations offered outside the scope of the plot, facts and events. It is harder to omit them, though, when watching the face, body movements, and gestures of the speaking man. This expression strongly emphasises the importance of the reservations made by my Interviewee: all (an enormous number indeed) the remembered camp episodes, all the images preserved in the memory which, he announces, will be translated into words in a moment, and released from the memory into the evolving narrative, will not give an answer to the question that perhaps remains the central one: 'How come I survived that?' This question, which Leon primarily asks himself, does not openly express the survivor's sense of guilt, which is otherwise so common among those who have escaped annihilation. This question should rather be seen as indicating a problem with the narrative about his own life, which is marked with so strong a camp experience. This experience cannot be completely integrated with the rest of the biography, or given a sense or meaning in the context of the whole story about this life. It is also hard to link the camp episodes with the binder of cause-and-effect interrelations that would sustain the story's structure. One cannot tackle it,

since the traditional formula of autobiography (oral included) where the author/narrator is not only the central character but also the perpetrator and main subject of the world he or she describes comes across as a serious obstacle. The concentration camp was, after all, the space of planned annihilation of this subjectivity – and a rather efficient one, as it reduced the possibility for the inmates to shape a reality other than that of the universe of the totalitarian camp institution.

This is visible in the language used to narrate the camp, particularly in the descriptions of the first moments (sometimes lasting long months) of the stay therein – and even more so than in the narrative of the arrest and the earlier imprisonment: in the *kaczet*, the biographical first-person narrator (the ‘I’) is radically pushed aside, turned into an object, whereupon the camp reality exerts its overpowering and devastating impact (“we were put in line, shaven, counted up, beaten...”). Perhaps, in order to survive (the) concentration camp, one had to break down the cogwheel of that objectifying mechanism, to cross the trajectory, and resume one’s own subjectivity. But how did it happen that the return was made possible, and for whom was it actually possible – under what conditions, and at what/whose expense? These questions are difficult to answer – too difficult, perhaps, for the survivor. Still, they have a tendency to stubbornly reappear. Hence, perhaps, my Interviewee’s helplessness in the face of the multiple episodes that his memory insistently (re)constructs and which can never be completely put together into a coherent and meaningful biographical narrative.

The purpose behind the concentration camp was to create a totalitarian institution, a separate world that was radically separated from the everyday reality before and after the camp – even including the occupation-period reality. The moment of the passage from the one world to the other has been settled for good in the former inmates’ biographical memories. Transports to camps, usually situated rather far away from the place of arrest and former imprisonment, were almost always done using train carriages. The Polish collective memory preserves a clear image of such cargo cars used by the Germans to transport Poles to concentration camps, and Jews to extermination camps; the Russians would use such carriages to carry thousands of people away to Siberia or labour camps. This image has been reinforced by many films, monuments, historical or recollective texts. The icon is so strong that a deviation from it in one’s real experience calls for additional clarification. Thus, paradoxically, fragments of the ordinary within the extraordinary camp world need to be justified and explained:

Carriages were brought along! Not cargo carriages, I must admit, but regular cars, passenger ones. In each compartment, // not a compartment but in each carriage, two, two *esmans* – one on the one side and the other, on the other side, would come along from time to time, to see what we were doing. ... And so we went.

A similar explanation reappears in many a former inmate account: I could risk a generalisation that most of those who travelled to their camps by ordinary passenger carriages with the escort of SS officers put an emphasis on this peculiar anomaly – or rather, the ordinariness of such travel, when clashed against the

generalised, stereotypical image of it that we have and share: an image of extraordinariness. ‘We share’, I have said, for this solidified image is shared by both of us – on the two sides of the microphone/camera. If my Interviewee was not aware of it, he would probably not demand so firmly that his recollection be given primacy before the said stereotype.

Many accounts describing the journey to a camp feature a snapshot of ordinary Germans, civilians, who are different from the soldiers/Gestapo-men escorting the transport. The story under analysis contains an episode like this:

We are in Germany now. Where are they carrying us? On some station, completely exhausted... // The people were fainting... The elderly, in particular, couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t, either. We were allowed to open the windows at a German station. We started shouting immediately, ‘Water! Water!’ One of the German women came up and gave us some water, that is, water, in some... // She gushed a pail [of water] at us. ‘*Polnische Banditen!*’, such a slogan [was] made. They threatened us with their fists, ranted...

This picture bears a trace of the characteristic sense of helplessness in face the grievance experienced, quite typical to the situation being described. The German (and Austrian) people, subject for a long time to a radical, deep and, usually, efficient indoctrination – at least at that time, in spring 1940 – were certain that the concentration camps primarily housed criminals in order to resocialise them, something that was essential (for themselves as well as for the social order).²⁴⁷ Such a definition of the situation, as shared by them, was not to be undermined and therefore was even more painful to the prisoners, on their way to the camp.

The moment of the first contact with the camp is emphasised in each biographical story, and is a distinct record in the memory. Distinct does not mean complete (there is nothing like this), or more exact than any other, but certainly important as a real and symbolic moment – next to the arrest, and stronger than it. This is the moment where an attempt is made at the individual, pre-camp identity; of challenging the existing image of oneself in each newcomer, their objectification and inclusion in the camp machinery. My Interviewee’s account confirms this profile, as it deals with the camp initiation rites quite extensively:

Arranged, we come out to the *Appellplatz*, the barracks are neat, the *Appellplatz* concreted. To the right, as you came in from the entrance, [were] the administrative buildings, the kitchen, the laundry, and rows of barracks. Seventeen... And on one side, and the street, and on one side were the barracks with the odd numbering,

247 It is worth recalling here that concentration camps had functioned in Nazi Germany since March 1933, the first inmates being people deemed political enemies (e.g. worker activists), ‘menacing’ or simply ‘useless’ to the new order. The Nazis made an extensive (and efficient) propaganda effort in order to make the labelling of these categories part of the awareness of the ordinary German people.

and with the even on the other. Opposite it was the even. [My] boots... The military policeman liked the boots. I was undressed first. Not just me, the first, as there were others in their boots – then I'm exaggerating. I was one of the first to be pulled from my boots. [*sic*] I did not pull my pants down, as that was not fitting, not German, was the design. We were driven to the baths. In fours. Well, some said that we'd be done, and some said... // There, my acquaintances from the other municipalities from Plock met, we met the priest, this and that. For there were many priests together with us. Well, so we're going. They said that you're [we're] going to the *Waschraum*... // You'll get your clothes, you'll be... // You'll take a bath, and then you'll go to the barracks. Well, barracks, good. We got undressed, and left everything there. Whatever they had with them, they had to leave, this time. Everything was left there, in the pockets. They sure made a good killing. And, the baths were indeed hidden, they were not out in the open, we got some soap, there was none of that human soap... And, out we go, along a sort of hall, and they're slinging us the clothes. The boots. There was no one watching whether those boots, // two boots: left one, right one, if they happen to fit. 'Swap them among yourselves! *Tauschen, tauschen!*' – swap it, swap it. Some hand-me-downs, some... // a shirt, trousers, and a jacket. Or, the striped clothing. Those who got the striped clothing, gained most, for this striped clothing was... // But, striped clothing of a worse sort, as we were destined for a transport anyway. For the next one. They knew already, it was all scheduled. After we exited these swimming baths, when... // and as we got dressed, we were all overwhelmed by empty laughter. For we were still strong, sound, and looked like clowns. But this was no laughing matter. We were arranged into groups of five, German *kapos* turned up And we were led to, // distributed for the barracks. The barracks were built so that in the centre, between the two rooms, between two bedrooms, actually, were toilets and lavatories. Which is not... something unthinkable in another camp. And the barrack itself was composed of two rooms, sort of, of two segments, sort of. The *kapos* welcomed us at the beginning, pointed to the beds, a rod in their hand, with kicks, screams.

This description of the first moments, which in reality were a few hours, spent at the Dachau camp, where Leon Ceglarz arrived in April 1940, seems to be merely reproducing them. But the apparently dry and 'clear' facts are reported, from the very outset, from a determined position – that of a prisoner who has survived the camp. A number of facts referred to in this fragment come from a later knowledge of the camp – for instance, the numbering of the barracks that he could not have been aware of at the moment he entered the camp (which is easy to find out by, for example, visiting the former Dachau camp site-of-memory or looking at its layout or a reconstruction); the 'human soap' interjection (he arrived at the camp in the spring of 1940, long before the mass killings of Jews in gas chambers started); the observation that they received a worse sort of striped clothing, as they had been determined straight away for transportation to another camp (if this was really the case, the newly arriving prisoners could not know about it). Characteristic of this description of the first contact with the camp is the calmness with which my Interviewee reports it. This quietness, controlled emotion, distance are especially

graspable in the video recording. This is an important factor, since this particular moment tended to be rather imbued with emotion in a number of interviews I have recorded – particularly, those featuring the former inmates who were to be detained at a camp three or four years later. One of the possible reasons might be that Mr Ceglarz was first assigned for Dachau – the old, model camp whose regime was softer than that of the others (only for those, let us note, who could compare it against other ones; certainly not for the numerous victims who perished there). He admits this himself – another trace of his later experience and knowledge – as he mentions the better sanitary conditions there, compared to other camps.

The presentation of dressing in striped clothing as a grotesque attracts our attention too. It is impossible to say today whether there and at that time the prisoners looked, to one another, ‘like clowns’, or whether it is perhaps today’s memory that tackles this encumbered experience in this way. Changing the clothes into the uniformed striped clothing was one of the intended ways to attack the individual pre-camp identity of each of the new prisoners, one of the key elements of the initiation procedure in the totalitarian situation imposed by the camp.

The recollection of those few, or dozen or so, first hours spent at the concentration camp is a very important, extended, and dense fragment of the narrative – and, in all probability, a very important moment in the biography. The shock of the clash with the camp universe, the bonds with the external world being brutally broken, the branding and imposition of a new role – that of prisoner/inmate, depersonalised underling identified by his/her camp number and a triangle of a defined colour, sewed onto the striped clothing... This first, acute clash is followed by a gradual, systematic, expanded absorption of the inmate by the camp world, their inculcation into it, and the teaching of its rules – and, on the other hand, the *Zugang*’s adaptation to the role of prisoner, redefinition of his or her concept of him- or herself. The camp terminology, recollections of former inmates, and historical literature concerning *kacets* call the inmate’s first few weeks at the camp a ‘quarantine’. What experiences preserved in my Interviewee’s memory are hidden behind this notion of sanitation?

And, what were our activities like? I’m not telling you about the beating, as this was a normal thing ... Tired, we swapped over, whatever and whoever could, swapped between one another. This man’s pants are too short, that one’s are, in turn, too long. We did look like clowns indeed. But, we swapped the things. We got accustomed to the fact that this was what our, let’s say, appearance was like. ... The activities, what were they in the beginning: we were driven out, in front of the barrack, put into groups of five, emptied our canteens. “Clean up your canteens!” Such a tiny thing, it seemed, clean up the canteens... while seated. What a job’s that? An hour, second, third, fourth, fifth... “Clean up your canteens!” breaks in, from time to time. It seems to you, it’s clean, and then again he breaks in, and is battering you. “Clean it! Wrong! Dirty!”... A foretaste of what could follow later on. Then, you have to learn to uncap yourself. The drill. I forgot we had been given the caps. Those *Mütze[s]* we were getting, sort of, camp-like, genuine. The drill: *Mützen ab* – ‘caps off!, caps on!’.

A trifle. What a fuss, take off, put on, take off, put on. But taking off for four hours, five hours – that’s enough.

This reminiscence of the first stage of the camp existence returned, in an even more detailed way, during our second meeting, a month later:

We were lined up in fives, each of us got a canteen, everyone was supposed to go out with their canteen and everyone was to clean that canteen. To clean it for an hour is a trifle, but to keep cleaning for six, eight hours, while meanwhile around you that *Stubenältester* is running, that is, the warden. And he’d already got his two Germans, the assorted helpers, who are like some hounds chasing game, when only someone pretended that he was cleaning that clean, very clean aluminium – what was there to clean? – canteen, then he’d get his whack. For us, not as yet accustomed, that seemed very hard work to do, and it *was* exhausting. Mentally – that would be to say too much, but psychically it was very hard. ‘Get up!’ every now and then, and the other exercises. ... The second day and the other days of that quarantine – as that was the quarantine, we were not taken to do work – consisted of doing gymnastic exercises all the time.

Using the camp jargon, Leon Ceglarz calls this stage of his camp route ‘the quarantine’, but the images he evokes and the interpretations he gives them suggest that the border is being crossed rather in the reverse direction: not between illness and health but between health and illness – between the increasingly distant outside world and the increasingly closer world of the camp. The degradation of pre-camp rules and hierarchies, standardisation, beatings, corporal punishment, physical exercises, drills, pointless labour, all done in vain and designed to bring about psychical degradation – all that was part of a deliberate procedure for the destruction of the existing identity, teaching the new rules and new hierarchies. The transportation to Dachau that my Interviewee describes also carried doctors, lawyers, academics, officials... In contact with the camp, those identities were called into question, abolished, or, at least, temporarily suspended. One had to learn the new rules – hastily, through practice.

This otherness, dissimilarity of the world they encountered and the one they had hitherto known and had domesticated is one of the reasons why the first moments in the camp are remembered so precisely. This also concerns the first job performed as soon as the inmate was included in a camp *Kommando*, which was usually the hardest compared to the later chores. Performed outside the main camp area, this labour was still equal for (almost) all the new inmates.

And later, they drove us to perform labour. We were taken to do work. At the building [*sic*] of the *esmans*’ barracks. For that camp, although it was the first, // one of the first Nazi camps, its crew was increasingly enlarging it. The *esmans*’ barracks were being constructed. ... We were used for the hard work. To be specific, there was, like, a concrete mixer operating. The concrete was carried, // the concrete to build developments on, to be used in construction of the barracks, to be used in the foundations. And all that, obviously, under the rod, with fear, with screams. And, under the *esmans*’ care

then already. An *esman* would stand there unconcernedly, watching as if, but... // The rule in the concentration camp was: try to show up the least, do your best to work as little as possible, pretend that you're working, get your food arranged by yourself, in whatever way you can. This is what I learned at the very outset. When still in Dachau.

This fragment of the narrative evokes the experience of the first job, in a broader context of the camp reality. This informs the language with which this world is constructed: 'we were driven out', 'we were used' – the 'I' is replaced by a mass of identical prisoners, driven off and chased away. The characteristic figure of the SS-man also appears, standing, as it were, on the opposite pole of that reality: an anonymous, depersonalised functionary of a totalitarian world. Sometimes, as in this particular case, a passive guard, somewhat bored observer-supervisor. Such an image, where a uniform-wearing member of the camp crew guards only its physical and imagined, symbolical boundaries, reappears in a number of former inmates' accounts. This is an important trait of that universe: the rod, fear, screams, etc., most frequently appear in descriptions of the relations between the inmates. The main roles were distributed between them: *kapos*, barrack chiefs, 'the eminent', *Zugangs*, *Muselmans*.... SS-men supervised this distribution of roles, guarded the limits within which the drama took place. They would sometimes proactively (and brutally) join the game, but this is not really what they had to do in order to sustain the everyday reality of the totalitarian institution they served. Guarding the flanks alone sufficed.

The above-quoted fragment contains, moreover, something else: a philosophy of surviving (in) the camp, worded straight away. It seems essential that my Interviewee utters this statement peremptorily, clearly, with a smile, if not with a shade of pride on his face. This is his philosophy, his explanation of the survival, and not a universal survival recipe at all. It is, rather, one of the several receipts which are sometimes formulated by those who have survived and who try to clarify this to themselves and to the others. It remains uncertain whether this strategy of rescue first occurred at the beginning of Leon's camp 'career' – at Dachau, as directly implied by the account – or whether it was perhaps elaborated somewhat later on, as the camp 'apprenticeship' somewhat evolved. There is no need (or possibility) to resolve it in exact terms – what matters is the very process of transformation which is visible here. In place of a dismayed, bewildered *Zugang*, an inmate who is aware of the situation he has been thrown into appears, and who tries to define it, constructs concepts about himself here and now, rather than 'out there'. Schütze's analysis would describe this in terms of gradually exiting the trajectory, whilst Goffman's approach would speak of entering the second stage of the inmate's moral 'career'. A 'secondary adaptation' takes place, when he discovers a 'second life of the totalitarian institution'²⁴⁸ – unofficial rules of action

248 Cf. K. Konecki, *Jazń w totalnej instytucji obozu koncentracyjnego...*

(and negligence), alleviating and abating the official rules and thereby facilitating the survival.

How was this philosophy put into practice, and with what results? Here is an example:

Hunger, hunger, hunger. I did know such hunger, as I've said, at the outset. Was this perhaps reappearing? It did reappear. ... When I throw some uneaten or old things onto the balcony, my heart hurts. Things such as someone was pouring out pea soup with cabbage – we looked up, and there's pea soup with cabbage; // with our hands, as we had nothing to eat it with, no dishes. Later, we took an effort [to get some]. And that's what we fed ourselves with a little. Only whenever it was possible, where there was no *esman*, as they would've gone out for their lunch break, we would throw ourselves onto the bins where their leftovers were. This was the first sign of a fight for life, the struggle with hunger.

Transfer to another camp is the next important experience Leon evokes in his story, virtually a 'turning point' in his inmate 'career': he was moved from Dachau to Gusen, which was a subcamp of Mauthausen. Such transfer between camps was part of most Nazi camp prisoners' experience. Characteristic in this particular case is his very short stay in the first camp and his journey to a completely different place – different not only in subjective terms, for the prisoner being transferred: the venue was just being created, transformed into a camp. An identical, or very similar, experience was shared by at least a few thousand members of the Polish intelligentsia, who after being detained in spring 1940 were transported to one of the old concentration camps (Sachsenhausen or Dachau, in most cases), to be transferred a few weeks or, sometimes, months later to Mauthausen or directly to Gusen as the camp's first (or, one of the first) prisoners.

The call [was heard] one day, 'They'll be selecting a transport to a camp! We'll be put together with prisoners from Silesia and Poznań.' We, our camp, // barrack, was next to the Silesians' barrack. Number seventeen. Opposite, there was another barrack of the Silesians, where Gustaw Morcinek [cf. fn. 107] was. That was sixteen, or eighteen. I can't tell. The one, or the other. And we could go out into that street [the camp street, i.e. a wide passage between the rows of barrack (PF's note)]. And learn what sort of transport we should be expecting. First of all, that Paul man said to us, 'You're going to the quarry, to build a new camp. You're sure to see what kind of a camp that is. What a camp is, and what a quarry is.' ... The transport that was supposed to consist of 1,025 people from Dachau. That was May 24th. 24th/25th. For it was in the night. The transport was in the night. Then, there were no regular carriages. There, the carriages were lockable, those were cargo cars.

This image, heralding a transport to a new, much harsher camp, which was then only being constructed, in a tougher field and a different climate, reappears in a number of accounts. It tends to be introduced in a very similar way – by using the words of warning, sometimes threat, uttered by someone of the camp milieu, who

prepares the inmates before they step deeper down into it, before they cross the next infernal circles – being grades of initiation at the same time.

The camp-to-camp transport usually looked similar, and in almost each case was recorded in the inmates' memories with a few expressive images. There is no exact, lengthy description of the journey: instead, what we hear are emotion-imbued, jagged scraps, fragments, moments of that experience. Also essential is the accelerated pace at which the story goes, thus emphasising the chaos, the incredible nature and fast pace of the events taking place, particularly from the standpoint of a scared prisoner:

And, towards evening, aligned, counted up by their names, and so on, singularly. And still, in addition, for you to come in quickly, not encumbering – to those cattle cars. ... And in the morning, in the small hours, when it's still dark, the train stops, the doors are unbarred, scream, noise, 'Raus!', the dogs are barking – some *esmans* are with dogs, with bicycles. Well, and they're aligning – counting, lining up, drawing out the dead corpses It was very tight, very tight in there. There's of course, there's no change for any toilet or anything like that... some backwoods. That was a horror, for it was dark, could see nothing, a harsh light, sort of, catching, like right now,²⁴⁹ and those *esmans*, barking – such, // with those, // I call it 'German talk'. Having been lined up, we're heading toward, // from Mauthausen, as that was Mauthausen station, ... to the roadway leading in the direction of Linz. ... 'Im Laufschrift!' I was, as I have said, rather steadfast there. The thing was, again, to be in the middle of that column. Not at the edge. And I, well, somehow managed it, a little. But, did I completely? Well, not really. For I was struck so many times. That a dog didn't bite me, it's true, well.

This last fragment shows that this group of prisoners, which was driven away, was formed of individuals with various positions in the rank, which could be decisive even to one's survival.

As was the case with half of the prisoners in that transport, my Interviewee was never taken to the central camp of Mauthausen: instead, he was sent directly from the train station to its newly established branch called Gusen. The memory of the first contact with that place is different from the memory of his first clash with the Dachau camp. Astonishment with this new camp space, completely different from the one that was formerly met, comes in place of the initial fright:

The area is illuminated, wired – and that's it. Some two barracks, *esmans'* ones. One of the barracks, as we learned later, was the kitchen. Four barracks, like, on wooden supports. Timber pegs, a plank laid upon it, and those four barracks were there, or perhaps not even four initially. There were probably just two initially. I am not sure. And, in any case... No, there were three barracks. And the fourth was under construction. And further on, a row of the initiating pegs. ... Mud everywhere, for

249 The interview was video-recorded on a January day, short and cloudy, so the camera operator had to use an extra high-power lamp.

that was in May, after all. The land [was] clayish. ... Inside the barrack: some straw scattered around, fenced with plank[s] put to stand on end – and that was it, as for [a] sleeping [facility]. By the windows, and in the centre. And so, the centre was the worst [position].

Entering the new camp marked the passage through the initiation rituals again, but the memory has preserved them otherwise now – without as many details, somehow quieter, although this other beginning could have been harder than the previous one. Rather than from the transcript, this can be read from the gestures of the speaking man's face:

And there, the whole ceremonial of living in this camp. The beginnings were awful. The beginnings were terrible. ... Life was being settled gruesomely. We didn't go to work initially, so that we, // the pubic hair to be cut, the delousing, there, numbers, numbering. ... I received number 102. That number was lucky for me, and glory be to God the Lord that I got this number.

My Interviewee can perfectly remember his low camp number – contrary to his Dachau number, which he was unable to recall. The reason is probably not just that the new number was shorter and thus easier to memorise: first of all, it remained with him considerably longer. Former *kacet* inmates can usually remember their long, six-digit numbers very well. The 'long life' of these numbers is due not to their length but the meaning their bearers ascribe to them. Here, the significance is emphasised in a peculiar manner, in the phrase used in Leon's commentary. 'Lucky number' indicates chance, fate, a stroke of luck. The thanks extended to God expresses Leon's belief in God's plan. These explanations refer to completely different belief systems, which are non-reconcilable on a rational basis but coexist and are perfectly complementary when enabling the surviving individual to explain his own rescue. Yet another explanation will appear in the course of the story, aligned with the logic of a totalitarian institution: with every month of the camp's existence, as the numbers attached to the new inmates are rising, having so low a number becomes a sign of survival, of a command of the rules of the camp universe; a certificate of adaptation. These digits communicate, then, very important signals to the other prisoners, including functional ones, and, obviously, to the camp's staff.

This awareness will only come with time. For the time being, the story goes on according to the chronology of the events of subjective importance in the camp life. Assignment for work, particularly for the first job, is certainly such an event. The type of work performed was one of the most important determinants of one's position in the camp hierarchy and a forecast of surviving the coming days, weeks or months.

And afterwards, the assignation to the various *Kommandos*, that is, labour squads. Unfortunately, I had no skills. With regard to physical work, I cannot do it, I have to admit. But there's nothing wrong with that. Everyone reported for work where they supposed there would be work to be done under a roof, a better job, and so on. The

gentlemen, my professors, joined the shoemakers, others to the *Efektenkammer*, that is, where, let's say... and I have to admit I was still undeveloped in this respect. For that was a command. After the countdown, after the roll call where the barrack was lined up ten each row, counted up. And, now form the camp squads, '*Arbeitskommando formieren!*' And everyone was running, knowing that this *kapo* is in charge of this, and that one is of that. But the quarry was the worst thing. Unfortunately, but that was a majority. ... That was a hill overgrown with various shrubs, grass, earth. There were two hills like that, one was [called] *Kastenhofen* and the other, *Gusen*. And us, everywhere there. It was our duty to make an open pit, throw off the earth, get down to the stone, the granite. But all that was uphill, everybody was visible. You couldn't, like, pretend you were doing your job...

The first assigned job was usually the worst, and hardest. New transports were sent to do such work, which was in line with the logic of the camp where labour was a method of crushing people and of putting them to death. An explanation of the survival contains the story of avoiding the work, dodging the superimposed rules, building another life. The phrase that negates the possibility of pretending is followed by a different message and, again, a commentary referring to the speaker's own philosophy of survival:

You would certainly pretend [that you were doing your assigned job (PF's note)]. You had to, like I've said, watch out, not be visible, watch where who was, where the *kapo* was, when the *esman*'s there, and where to hustle some food. And, not to draw their eyes upon you. This was the rule I learned, and this was the rule I applied.

But such a recipe could only prove efficient briefly: to survive, one had to be allocated a different, better job. In order to be offered such an opportunity, a proactive attitude and good acquaintances were a must – and, speaking more generally, coming to terms with the surrounding reality, be it on an elementary pragmatic level, allowing one to cope with the situation extemporarily, on a here-and-now basis. Making an attempt to gain control over the trajectory by activating these resources marked the start of a new phase in the inmate's career.²⁵⁰ The process was not easy:

And, well, I was not successful finding a job there. I wasn't able to. I requested that [former] professor of mine, he too said: 'Look, well, I cannot.'

This thread – in search of new labour – is reported, again, in the first person singular. The narrator is the subject again. Thus, the grammar is indicative of an identity being regained and of an influence, be it minimal, on the course of events.

I went to that outcrop, but then I could see which way the wind was blowing. Something different, perhaps? Then I, well, tried out the so-called *Endwasserungskommando*. I fell

250 In his *Jazń w totalnej instytucji ...*, K. Konecki describes the passage from the '*Zugang*' phase into the 'fulfilment' phase.

out of the frying pan into the fire. For the *kapo* there was one-of-a-kind It was customary with him that he'd select those wearing glasses for the water that was pumped with the fire engines. I was wearing glasses, I forgot to tell you – he'd select those wearing glasses. Those were teachers, most of them professors, some barristers. He would laugh, and we had to do the pumping before his eyes. That labour was horrible. He'd clobber, lash us, and that's it.

The work done with another *Kommando*, apparently a better activity, could turn out to be a trap if a cruel *kapo* happened to be in charge or, simply, the weather conditions changed. Unexpected switches and incidents of losing position could also occur in the inmate's career. A position could be lost through ill-performed work. A number of jobs performed in the camp were supposed to lead to specific results, and this was the limit behind which the prisoners avoided effort and involvement. The rules of a 'second life' in a totalitarian institution could not intervene too strongly in the official rules. Mr Ceglarz recollects certain situations where this border was crossed:

And later on I moved from that *Endwasserungskommando* to the quarry Why did I go there? Because it was raining at night, and when it rained, they had failed to properly protect it – I was hoisting, I was still that strong then, I'd carry along such crossbeam stumps and planks, so as to support it, so that the ground wouldn't tumble. But we did it wrong. And in the morning we come along, and everything's all smashed up, the timbering[*s*] completely wrong, water everywhere, well, a horror. The lashing [we got for that was] unreal. We had, in that sludge, in that water, first to draw out those boards, take out those pickets, smooth out the ooze, and do all that anew. And an expert finally appeared, for there was a foreman too, an ordinary one, like, who supervised it, but he wouldn't show up there. And I went to that *Oberbruch* In the beginning, I had to – before I took a good look around: where, what, how, some function, so then I had to, well, load up those stones. Both the stones for the machinery and those for the roadway were loaded up.

The long period of his work in the quarry was merely touched upon during our first meeting. Its recollection became more expressive only later in the story, during the subsequent recording:

And that was like, when someone would look at it from aside. There's a group going, sort of, carrying those stones, a snake of people. The other group stands below and they topple the earth down. A pretty, nice, tiny view, but that was so hard. Should the *kapo* notice that you're selecting a somewhat small pebble, oh, if he only noticed, as it happened he wouldn't notice, I did it this way, and not only me, by the way... then, he would give [the man] a deadweight stone. It was dangerous then, as you would get laden with the stone, fall over, the stone [toppling] onto him, he'd get his extra with the legs [i.e. get a kicking] or rod, or butt, if an *esman* was close... and he'd return carried by his mates. ... We worked from very early in the morning, the wakeup call was at three, to the roll call yard at four, the camp groups getting formed. The *kapo* formed a group for the most indispensable works – for the quarries and the open pit.

... The work went on continually, you were not supposed to pause while working. I would cut the time short by saying the rosary, that was a good way to survive till the time of relative rest came – the lunch break, of one hour or forty minutes. This gave me the comfort of feeling excluded from what I saw there. And, again. Carrying the stones was at times a bit better than wagging the trowel. I chose the stones, whenever I could. Could I always do it? No.

Rather than describing a specific scene, this particular fragment is a generalised reminiscence of the camp's daily reality, at one of the stages of imprisonment. But it contains more than a mere description of the *Lager*-related routine. There are two moments that caught my attention. First, the speaker's considerable distance toward the world he is describing, its symbolisation and the way it is shown – like a picture hanging on the wall, framed and observed from a safe distance. Second, a philosophy of survival, remarked upon once again: avoiding the worst kinds of activity and saying prayers to detach oneself from the surrounding reality, protecting oneself against it, entrenching oneself in one's inner, deep-down 'I'. Both these elements lead us not so much to the universe of that camp but rather, to a strategy of giving it a sense or meaning by those who experienced it.

It becomes apparent based on the above-quoted sentences (and even more so whilst listening to the words being uttered, their intonation and accompanying emotions reflected on the speaking man's face) that as Leon gradually immerses in his camp story, with more and more episodes being consecutively evoked, the *Lager* universe becomes increasingly domesticated and thus less and less frightening. Its rules become cognised, absorbed, and applied with growing efficiency. These internal changes are reinforced from the outside. Parcels received from relatives proved such reinforcement while at the camp. There is no coincidence in the fact that a number of long-term inmates perceive their camp experience as split into two periods – the 'pre-parcel' and the 'parcel' one.

There was already a possibility of sending, // getting the parcels. And, of getting cigarettes for money, which everyone had, // well, maybe not everyone, but in their account did they have – my wife would send me money to my account. And we were getting cigarettes for that. I didn't smoke, but the others did though. I was getting soup. Too bad – if you want to smoke like this, then you've got to smoke.

These sentences, uttered with a smile, almost jokingly, might cause a dissonance – they upset a stereotypical image of the concentration camp as a place completely cut off from the surrounding external world. Yet, the separation was not complete. Care was taken about maintaining various facade institutions: letters, parcels, individual notifications of a prisoner's death, etc. All this created a falsified image externally, but also helped those inside survive. And, moreover, it helped sustain the entire system. This is especially true for the parcels, which were used not only by their direct receivers but also by a group of fellow inmates and camp supervisors, as well as, indirectly, by a number of other participants in the camp 'commodity exchange' system.

Leon Ceglarz's story, similar to those of his camp colleagues, somewhere loses its linear order of events. As the narration evolves, the memory dictates its chronology, with its own hierarchy of importance. A short episode, once evoked, can engage more strongly and take more space than a description of several months' imprisonment or of the daily performance of a monotonous chore. Or, it may appear in an improper place, across a chronologically structured narration. Here comes one such expressive episode, which occurred at the beginning of Leon's stay at Gusen, but its image was activated in his memory in the context of later camp memories. It reappeared in an even more detailed shape during our second meeting. This is one of the most distinctly described events in his entire autobiography, not only in its camp stage; hence, the image is worth evoking in its entirety, in the fullest version available:

I once had an accident, after work, at barrack number 2, at that same Pastewka's. He chose a *Dolmetscher* [interpreter (PF's note)] for himself, to assist him, a guy from the Poznań region, I'm not telling you his name, I know the name. And he is probably still alive, that's why I won't tell you. And he is a respected man today. It was he whom Pastewka assigned, as a token of trust, to give out the lunch. Because after work, // there was a period when after the work – in the year '40, or '41 – we would come to the barrack to have our lunch. And, therefore, I said that [there was] an hour, forty minutes, or thirty minutes for a break. Then, in this case, we came into the barrack ... to be given lunch. It was swede, rather thick, but later it was thinner and thinner. And that honoured gentleman, a professor, who knew languages perfectly That gentleman poured me a portion, like, to make it quite even, and none of that thick, as they call it, heaped spoon. To his acquaintances, yes. When my turn came – and he was from the transport that I was on, from Dachau – I say, 'Oh how you've poured it, // that's kind of a portion, eh?' Yes, those were my words, 'That's kind of a portion, eh?' And that man, I wouldn't like to give his name, so let it be: 'I've got enough of that', for the others had already complained too, that he, such portions, such as, like of the sort – just well-measured ones, so that he would have as much as possible left for himself. 'Cause the rest that remained, the barrack chief came in later. He would report it to the barrack chief, that some food had been left, and then the barrack chief would generously give an additional portion, of course in the first place to him, a full bowl, and to the others whom he and the barrack chief had assigned, he'd add a little each. 'I've got enough', he says, 'of all that, I'm going to report it to the barrack chief.' ... The Silesians say to him, "Don't go, don't go, he'll club him to death!" And so he went. They, those Silesians, asked him not to do it. He went to that Pastewka. Pastewka calls me, he calls that guy too, to come up to him (he's still holding the soup). And there is less and less of it, for it's getting thicker. Pastewka tells me to hold the bowl, and with that ladle – such a metal ladle, semi-circular, on a metal, sort of, handle, genuinely made – he pours it into that bowl. The bowl [was] one-litre, there were porcelain ones then. It fits the notches. A wee bit it fits. 'Is it one litre?'. 'It is' – in German. He gave him that bowl of mine, filled, took that ladle from him and gave me such a beating that I thought he would really club me to death. Did I cry? I don't know. I might have

cried when I stood by the barrack. For all that was during the break, between one, // the break between the one and the other hard work. He lashed me so that, well... // And my trousers were bedraggled, and I was blood-stained, and my nose, my mouth, was dripping. In all... not a man. Obviously, he didn't give [me] that soup, // I didn't get it. He threw me out, kicked me off the barrack. He literally kicked me off the barrack, so that I waited in front of the barrack for my labour assignment. The break was over, I'm going, // I crawled up to the work. And so it was with those who were sick, with something... // they could not work, then they were condemned to, to a finish. To finish off your life....

That Pole who was later hanged [i.e. after the war (PF's note)] was already the *kapo* then. But, he had come with the same transport as I did. And he protected me in some way. That is, he let me have those trousers cleaned, go to the latrine, even get some water, wash myself a little, my face and the rest of my body. And didn't drive me so to the labour. That would be, to him, // if I testified, I would say this then. Although he was cruel, and has, // had people on his conscience. That's a fact. Indisputably.

We're on our way back from work, the distribution of bread [follows], which I've talked about. I'm not getting any bread, but am getting a kick instead: 'You stand there till the roll call, // till the night, in front of the barrack.' I thought that the gentleman – I'm not willing to give his name, let me stress – would address him, or give him his own piece of bread, // a piece of his bread, since he had got my bread. He devoured my bread! That he would share with me – hah, forget it! And later, when I was let go into the barrack, and right before the lights-out, the barrack chief had, // that Pastewka man had a custom of doing the rounds between the bunks ... and a little in Polish, a little in German, he'd be saying his pieces of sagacity there: 'Only he who is strong will survive, the strong one deserves, he deserves his extra portions'; 'the vigorous ones need to be preserved, the diligent ones...' Such, sorry to say, stupidities. I wanted to say something different. I was lying by the window. ... 'Ah, that voracious one', and a kick, and the rod. Every evening I was getting that portion from Pastewka. But it was Providence, and the people, to an extent, perhaps that was a Silesian, he, the camp's *Schreiber*, he assigned me to another barrack. And that barrack saved me.

This very emotionally depicted scene proves to be extremely and deeply haunting for my Interviewee. This is one of the crucial and central points in his camp story. Not only because the blows he received were so strong and painful that remembering them makes Leon wince with pain, a trace of pain being reflected on his face. Even more painful were the wounds the event left on his psyche. Once again, this was the moment (or, such a moment came in a later recollection) when the image of (the) camp as a place where the torturers are easily arranged in opposition to the victims, the two groups being placed on opposite poles, was challenged. The torment was apparently initiated, in this case, by another Polish inmate who advised his principal, the barrack chief. This sense of unjustness, undermining the system of values adhered to, proved perhaps more painful than those strokes and kicks. And, certainly, longer-lasting, as the pain can be seen on the storyteller's face when he comments on the incident, affection mixed with tears:

Yes, it was so. And that was owing to the campmates. The mates who later on assumed quite respectable posts with the camp. But, well, whatever. They're alive, they have survived the camp, they're great activists. Let it be so, with them.

It is very hard to come to terms with the fact that the camp has breached the limits of admissible behaviour also for the victims. This hard and painful subject appears rather rarely in former inmates' accounts; it tends to be recorded much more often in their unspeakable memory. It becomes at least partly expressed in this account. Only partly, though, because the strongly emphasised restraint toward disclosure of the name of the captive who lent his voice to the suffering is a manifestation of a defensive attitude, devised to protect the reputation of the other survivors (to the extent possible, given the painful memory of the contradictory experiences), thereby sustaining the image of (the) camp with clear divisions into perpetrators and victims. Once again, the reference to God facilitates the connection of these different and incoherent elements, by being contained within one narrative fragment, a single episode that has a sense within the biography.

The chronology of the camp experiences, once disturbed, cannot be completely retrieved. A linear narrative has been replaced by images overlapping in layers. The memory of Leon's own experiences has been overlapped with a generalised image of the camp, its institutions, collective rituals, and extraordinary events experienced together. Moreover, individual experiences and personal observation have been mixed in those moments, at times inseparably, with a later-acquired knowledge about what was happening, what the camp was and what it looked like. All this is unified by attempts to explain, and add a sense or meaning to, the speaker's own survival. Only at the second meeting did an opportunity emerge to set in order, albeit a little, the interspersed reminiscences from those various registers of memory.

The escape of a Polish inmate named Nowak was an important occurrence in the history of the Gusen camp. This episode belongs to a shared, generalised memory of former (Polish) inmates of Gusen (Poles formed a majority among them). It appears in almost all the recorded accounts of the survivors of that camp since its earliest days, when the said escape took place. It also reappears, obviously enough, in a number of published camp memoirs. This is how the moment in question appears in my Interviewee's report:

This was the transport I mentioned at the beginning – the Warsaw one. There was, // he escaped from that transport, // his name was Nowak. A Varsovian. A young chap. The roll call's on. ... The roll call, one's missing; // can't remember the year. Of course, the first to get, // to get his lashing was the *Schreiber*, for having admitted it. Although he was not guilty at all, as that one fled from the quarry. ... They stopped [the roll call]. They're counting once, twice. Nowak's missing. Who? Nowak. Which barrack? Number this-and-that. Up on the stool! Twenty-five [lashes] that *Schreiber* got. I can't remember whether the barrack chief also got anything or not, but I think he probably got his share as well. The man has indeed escaped, it turns out. Then, go search for Nowak on the camp premises, the order comes. ... 'Nowak! Where are

you?’ Everyone was dispersed. The *kapos* were given shovel handles, the *esmans* in their full equipment, with bullwhips. ... That was worse than the shovel handle. It hurt more. And, they’re driving How many of the people did not manage to escape! How useful the scouting turned out for me then, you know. Really, I’m quite serious at this point. Perceptiveness, fast decision[-making]... Since, as he’s beating... I unfortunately have to put it in this way – as he’s beating the other one, he won’t make it to give me a beating. You were escaping like a hare. We hid underneath the pickets [what the narrator has in mind is the wooden stake structures upon which the barracks were erected (PF’s note)] of those unfinished barracks. The *esmans* are coming. As those walls were not there, you could slip away on the other side. And there, again, the *kapos* are standing.

To make things worse, one of the *kapos* dashed on the wires which were imbued [sic] with electricity and, well, he fried himself. The *kapos* beat us up then... with doubled force. They battered the people in a most extreme way. What’s more, we got no lunch, // dinner, we stood all the time at that, // at the *Appellplatz*, a battering trestle set by that gate, and the *esmans* were walking: ‘Du! You! You! You! You...’ Between the ranks, like the ranks were [arranged]. And, like this, in this way [showing]. And there, on that trestle were the *esmans* beating. With those bullwhips. One, // and the blow – you had to count. Twenty-five double lashes. I wouldn’t know a man could stand [this]. I didn’t get twenty-five, I got fifteen. Fifteen times two. ‘Cause, one on the one side, the other one on the other. Get it, get it! Get it, get it! It depended on who, // who had the very bad luck. I was assigned too. The young ones were assigned, as a young man there perished. I was twenty-something, wasn’t I. // No, I was thirty then. I was in the prime of my life. The very flower of the age. The night [was spent] on beating us, as long as, until they were fit enough. The *esman* and the *kapos*. We endured it. And in the morning, a roll call again, those who perished, were killed at the camp, were gathered up. And, to work. But the labour had then to be executed the German way again, which means *im Laufschrift*, at a run. ... Maximum security. The *kapos* ...

Some hundred people were killed for Nowak, and Nowak was caught, carried back and, one fine... – I cannot tell when that was, on what day – I see Nowak standing by the track, with, sort of, // a sort of inscription, tablet, there: ‘Hurra, ich bin wieder da! – Hooray, I’m back!’ Horribly beaten, to the... to the... I think he wasn’t even hanged but [carried] to the crematorium straight away. Was it, to the crematorium? No, there was no crematorium then as yet, but to the corpse dump, the corpses were transported to Mauthausen, for the gas was there.

A long extract again, but there is no way to cut it shorter or summarise it, if one is to take a closer look at this condensed fragment of the narrative – not just content-wise but also in terms of the way it is structured. The dots primarily indicate the moments where my Interviewee tried to show the course of the events he was describing – literally, show: using gestures, ‘staging’ them with the use of a few pieces of paper (reversed pictures) and with his fingers. This cannot be reflected in a transcription.

The collective character of the experience being described is notable. The lashes he received, the ‘fifteen double blows’, were individualised, inflicted on a specific prisoner. However, as opposed to that earlier-told scene of beating, nothing is said here of the personally experienced pain or suffering. “We endured it”: the memory has preserved this particular episode as a camp-wide action, unleashed after one inmate escaped, one whose experience was shared by all the inmates. The individual experience has vanished in the attempt at describing the whole thing. Overlapping with the individual memory is the knowledge of the occurrence that was acquired later, and it is probably impossible to unambiguously determine which of the elements belongs to which of these interpenetrating dimensions. All of them have been fused in the autobiographical memory into a coherent close-ended narrative. There is one more thing apparent – again, in the video rather than the transcript itself. This fragment of the narration is not limited to reconstructing a ready and perfectly preserved story in the collective memory of the oldest inmates of Gusen. The narrator’s longer pondering at some moments, his uncertainty as to details, corrections made as he proceeds with his story, all reveal a complicated process of constructing a biographical narrative conglomerated into one, using varied elements activated in various registers of the memory.

The escape of the inmate Nowak is an event that belongs to my Interviewee’s individual biographical story as well as to the history (historical narrative) of the entire camp. This event being evoked, the individual narrative is pushed toward a construction of similar images that show the collective fate of the prisoners. The individual experience is very strongly inscribed in the story of the whole camp, its specificity, institutions, and various groups of inmates, as well as the methods of killing – as in the following fragment:

Gusen murdered – well, let’s say, let’s assume I’m going to say this conventionally –hygienically. To be specific, completely unshielded showers were made – with cold water. On New Year’s eve of some year, I can’t tell again which year, for I can’t remember – [there’s] a muster between the barracks; naked, naked, in the time of... in the snow, at a run, *im Laufschrift*, into that shower. And around there stood the *esmans* and barrack chiefs, who battered whoever would try to avoid the water. But again, you either had to somehow crouch, or get inside there. But there were many smart ones such as that. And, the barrack chiefs, and the *kapos*, when they got enraged that they’d got wet, then it was hideous. A death crop, too.

The other method [of killing the prisoners – PF’s note]: gassing with the use of combustion gas. ... The news was released that all the older ones whenever they felt bad, sick, would be moved to some less rigorous camps. They were mustered at barrack twenty, or twenty-one. No, twenty it was, at barrack twenty, including that colleague of mine who had reported me for the transport. I’m saying, ‘You know what, this doesn’t look quite fair.’ And, he would try to persuade me: ‘Come, Leon, you’ll find it better for you there, you’ll fit in among us there.’ They were given a quarter-loaf of bread and later were given no food for two or even three days. Yelling, hollering, screaming. You could not pass them anything, for there were windows

panes. You weren't supposed to pass, no way. At last, they were carried, in batches, to Mauthausen. And there, on their way – or somewhere else, as elsewhere there was some other camp still – and there, before they reached the destination, they were slain.

Well, and the hunger, as I said. And the hunger. Hunger, beatings, lack of food, hard work, in excess of any human norms. Horse power, they say. Rubbish. No horse would bear what a man is able to bear.

And there were *Kommandos* who were carriers of death. ... This was terrible sweat and toil, for everything was on display, and we had long, sort of, spades, narrow ones, and the clay had to be dug, throw it on the conveyor belt, that belt led up to – this was partly mechanised. And, one of my mates, from my municipality, quite a proper lad, but he's survived... – no, he hasn't. He wasn't strong enough. A school headmaster, by the way. And the belt pulled the spade from him, and the machine came to a stop. So beaten up a man, as he was carried into the barrack – 'cause the number had to be in order – I had never ever seen. The head – the head, of a slim bloke, all of a sudden there was a... his head like a pumpkin. I don't know where that came from. ... Terribly beaten up, well, and he died some time after. ...

Other methods of [inflicting] death – this was already toward the end, when the barrack was complete There was some examination and I even wanted to offer myself, but I was too slim. 'Cause the bloated were taken. Not bloated, but 'good looking' ones. I already was under selection, but was rejected at the selection. Glory be to God. I wouldn't have stayed alive.

Yet [another] method, an overt one this time. Not only elderly people were grouped at the barrack but the *Muselmanns* were, ... that means, the ones that could not walk, could not work, were unfit to do work. This was in the later years: '43, '42– even early, '44 as well. Between the years '42 and '44. A selection was held. The barrack queued up, like I said. Groups of ten. Chmielewski was passing by – this was the Gusen commandant's name, he was caught later, and hanged. A trial was held. They testified. ... In any case, he passed by the rank: '*Du! Du!*' Step out, line up, complement it, so that a rank is made up. And that first rank from which a selection was made would come forward. I was a *Muselmann* then, I could hardly crawl. No parcels were arriving. In any case, I didn't receive many parcels. ... So, there comes the moment that my rank [is inspected]. And I'm standing, more or less, in the middle. And when the command was given of that first rank, which had already been inspected, that ... [they took] two steps forward, then I jostled and crept into that rank. And so no one could look at me, as he would only see my shoulders. This is how God was protecting me.

On enumerating these various methods of killing applied in the camp, my Interviewee assumes the role of eyewitness – his intention is to give a testimony, attest to that reality. This is also the testimony of an accusation made on behalf of those who were killed. The narration becomes very quiet here, slow, proceeding at an even pace. It does not overly involve the narrator's emotions: he quietly reconstructs the camp's horror. The words being uttered are assisted by smooth gesticulations. The images of that reality which is expressed in words

give an impression of having been well-domesticated in this Interviewee's memory – they are observed from the perspective of an experienced and listless prisoner. Only the last quoted scene is exceptional: joining a rank that was safer, in the scenario being described, as it had already been inspected. The taking of the initiative is described with a sudden animation, intense mimicry, gestures which involve the narrator completely, as he tries to show how he elbowed his way past in that moment. The static memory/knowledge of inflicting death in the camp recedes into the background – a dynamic narrative about the narrator himself remains in the foreground. The narrator/main character in this scene believes again, as it were, that he can control the course of events but a moment afterwards makes Divine Providence responsible for the success of the step he took.

Detailed descriptions of all those (and many other) methods of killing are encountered in historical and recollective literature concerning the camp in question. The purpose of these citations is not, however, to confirm these findings: it is, rather, to shed light on the process of the interpenetration of the memory of one's personal experiences with a generalised, objectivised knowledge. This is where this interpenetration is clearly visible: a story of what was happening/occurring (methods of killing, in this case) is interspersed with a story about what my Interviewee has experienced, what he has been through. Not in general but in this particular context, those specific situations. There is no chronology observed, no precise setting in a temporal context. Instead, there come up clear, expressive images constructed by the memory. Mutually independent, they are merged in the narrative into one story and strongly united by a hard interpretation of the narrator's salvation, by the reference made, once again, to God's providence and care. In this way, a story about the ways of putting (the others) to death becomes the story of his own rescue; the presence of the speaker, as recorded by the camera, makes the camp universe but a background for his personal story of survival. And, it enlarges the abyss between him – a survivor, and those whom the Lord did not protect, and who thus cannot tell us their own stories.

The enumeration of the ways of inflicting death leads Leon Ceglarz's memory toward reminiscing about a separate group of inmates – the Soviet prisoners of war who were transported to the camp from the summer of 1941 onwards. They were exempted even from the rules of the camp universe. They perished in mass numbers, annihilated through the hardest labours and the most inhuman treatment. No concrete figure of that group, not even one person, appears in Mr Ceglarz's narrative. They are just a mass of humans, as perceived by an older, experienced inmate. Their fate is evoked not as an independent episode, an autonomous fragment of a narrative of what the Gusen camp was. The image of the Russians becomes part of the background to the story of Leon's own fate; it is juxtaposed, strongly contrasted with his own, completely different experience in that time. This contrast probably belonged to that world – and certainly forms part of its image today, as rendered in the autobiographical narrative.

As transports of the Russians started flowing in after 1941, this alleviated the fate of the Poles a little, and the rigour was somewhat mitigated, whereas the whole odium, the whole acrimony, the whole hatred was concentrated on those miserable Russians.

To cope with this contrast was no easy task for the narrator. My Interviewee appears incapable of explaining the process of his personal transformation in the camp: from a newcomer, frightened *Zugang*, to a *Muselmann*, to an old inmate, accustomed to the camp. I cannot even be sure whether he can see the precipice between the two extremes, although his narrative, perhaps unintentionally, expresses it strongly. This comes exactly at the point when he compares his situation with that of the Soviet POWs – the most downtrodden group among the Gusen captives, at that moment:

We, the old prisoners, were already somehow respected. I was an old prisoner. I had that number, 102. Even the *kapo* would, like, show respect there.²⁵¹ I always stuck to the rule I mentioned. But an old prisoner would everywhere have some sort of facilitations. He'd come off, for instance, and be given an extra bowl from a, kind of, 'eminent person'. I was never 'eminent', but there were some who never ate the camp food. ... Well, then, those Soviet prisoners, straight away. Having been registered, numbers assigned – they were not even given numbers, I should think. No, the numbers were given to those later ones, who survived. They were driven off, straight away, to do hard labour. We, the old prisoners from that small *Kommando*, which didn't number a hundred, were simply, in a way, spared. I know this sounds ugly, that the people were perishing, but such were their methods.

Here, again, the image expresses at least as much as the words do. When the narrator talks about his low inmate number, he straightens in his armchair, his face brightens up, he taps his forefinger on his jacket lapel, where a military distinction is pinned for the time in our conversation – more or less where the number was sewed onto his striped clothing and the camp *Winkel*. This gesture, almost a pride in the long term served at the camp, is, I think, not only a pride of today: it is also, or perhaps, primarily, a shade of the camp-period pride, reinforced and confirmed many a time later on, over the years of Mr Ceglarz's activity with the milieu of former Nazi camp inmates. One more detail is of importance: a complementary message about the long term served as an inmate, and the ensuing privileged position in the camp – the emphasis on his 'not being an *eminent person*'. As was

251 In his camp memoirs, *Pięć lat kacetu*, Stanisław Grzesiuk wrote: "There was a binding rule in the camp: 'Respect the old inmate'. It sufficed for me when an old prisoner asked me for help, that he be assisted, to the extent possible"; and, elsewhere: "The 'respect the old inmate' rule was observed by all the old prisoners of any nationality, the *kapos*, barrack leaders, and operational staff, and lashings would be given to many such who, whilst strong, fresh and eaten-up himself – having just been for a few days at the camp – beat or otherwise did harm to an old prisoner, without a reason" (Warszawa, 2000, p. 314).

the case with a number of other interpersonal relations in the camp universe, the favouring was gradable. At a certain, specified place within that scale, enjoying privileges meant being an 'eminent person' of the camp. My Interviewee many times remarks on the distance between him and this category of inmates, which is thus negatively marked. But, 'eminent person' is also an imagined status. For the prisoners at the very bottom of the scale, such as the aforementioned Russians, the limit of 'being an eminent person' could be defined somewhere else; likewise, for those who 'have not eaten the camp food' for a certain time. The image becomes extremely complex if we bear in mind how ephemeral camp status was – and that it did not move in just one direction. The narrative under discussion powerfully confirms this, after all.

Labour is one of the unifying, frequently reappearing threads in most autobiographical camp accounts. This is rather clear, since work was one of the central experiences for all the camp's inmates. This is so at least in a quantitative, external, unbiased depiction – they would be occupied with labour for several (sometimes, a dozen or so) hours a day; and, it was labour that had a decisive say in their status in the inmate hierarchy, and in the chance to survive.

Work in the quarry was one of the hardest in the camp conditions. But not any and all instances of it: there was an enormous differentiation. Various categories of people were hired to do the excavation and machine processing of stones. The hardest physical work was done in stone pits by the new inmates – this being a method for their initial selection. We have no accounts of those who failed to be 'promoted' from their working *Kommando* – they would not have stayed alive till the liberation. Leon Ceglarz had a few years of work in the quarry to his credit, until 1944. He would not have survived, had he not switched to a less demanding type of work, performed in better conditions, at least partly under a roof. His low inmate number clearly facilitated the change. Images from that activity follow here, remembered in detail as separate episodes, and only due to their peculiar character – they diverge from the daily routine, which has been diluted in the man's memory. No improved conditions would have mitigated the alertness, eliminated the perils, life-threatening ones included. These dangers and threats sometimes resulted – here is one example – from an overly daring enjoyment of the privileged position. Such abuse could entail a great price to pay, but, on the other hand, the chance to survive was dramatically lower for those who didn't take a risk.

Later on, I worked under a roof, in a shed, to where I carried the pickets for machining the stones and the drills for firing the fuses. Those drills were rather long, two meters each sometimes, and heavy; 130 or 150 steps you had to tramp in order to carry that to the forge, and be back with this thereafter. And, some mean civilian expressed his discontent about me to Krutzki, that I only care about the Steinmetzers, rather than carrying the drills away. But I did, only that I endeavoured to work as little as possible, and was caught at it. Right before the roll call, before going down the pit, Krutzki loaded upon my arm so many drills that, how I could bear that, I cannot tell even today, and told me to carry [them] at full speed to the forge, and bring new ones

back. I really did my best. I was back, the squad was already waiting, Krutzki told me to leave the drills, and, well, I got a few kicks from him. But that was not the end of the story, for the following day, he called me to come into his shed, told me to get down the pit and bring him a cable. And so I did, and he, 'Bend over!' And he gave me a thrashing, fifteen lashes with the cable; I only groaned, no screaming.

Just like I didn't scream when I was being hanged for having 'arranged for', that is, stolen, the food that was being unloaded for the *esmans*. I took that picket into a sort of tiny case, I walked down. There was a little layoff at the time, that was just before Easter, and the parole [=gossip] was passed that they're unloading the food and the *kapo* in charge of loading was not on guard. We had to take a look. And it was probably then that I might've gone together with Grzesiuk. Because he worked for the Steinmetzers as well. The *esmans* wouldn't have caught me then, I eluded them. I did pinch something then. Something good, which didn't fit the political prisoner's diet, it was just for the *esmans* for the holiday. But I got into the *kapo's* black books. And when the *Führer* in charge of that *Kommando* had to excuse himself with the *Lagerführer* for the fact that they had pilfered that much, then he said it was the *kapo* who hadn't seen to it. And he then noted the numbers, which included the number 102, being mine. They hanged us for a couple of minutes on a log, by the hands, tied at our backs. I've been having problems with my humeral joint, for my hands became twisted then. That pain, you couldn't describe it. Then, I had to go to the work, but my mates managed to conceal me, somehow. And the *kapo* said, 'You got what you deserved.'

The distinctive feature of both these fragments is their narrative character – a rapid narration is definitely dominant, rendering the memory of those events dynamic. The speaker's own philosophy of survival in the camp reappears, albeit in a less explicit manner this time. Both punishments fell on my interviewee at moments when he betrayed his own rule of survival, and abandoned his usual vigilance. He clearly stresses that he received a beating with a cable because he was incidentally caught by a supervisor (not because he pretended he was doing work!); again, he was hanged on a log as 'they had pilfered that much'. The stress is on 'that much', which is, too much – the border was crossed and the punishment fell in exchange. So much had been pilfered that the SS-man responsible for the *Kommando* had to seek excuse with his commander. The words uttered at the close of each of the stories by the *kapo* – the direct supervisor of the working crew – come, not incidentally, as the punchline to the story. We are not certain whether the exact words are reproduced – perhaps yes, one cannot check this, but there is no point in any case. Of importance is what the narrator's memory constructs: what we can see, hear and try to understand today.

The last months of the stay in the camp – from the standpoint of those who, like my interviewee, spent a couple of years there, having been through the various grades of their inmate careers – were a time of chaos, anxiety, disturbance of the elaborated camp order, including the elaborated/luckily received/ Providence-bestowed camp positions. For researchers into the objective history

of Nazi concentration camps, this change is easily explainable, in external terms. Its reasons include: a series of Wehrmacht military defeats; the eastern front moving westwards; the consequent 'evacuation' (being a euphemism used in the tormentors' language; the victims called them 'death marches') of concentration camp prisoners situated in the east (mainly, Auschwitz) to those further inside the Reich (Mauthausen, with its network of subcamps disseminated across Austria, was one of the major destinations of those transfers); and, lastly, the fall of the Warsaw Uprising and the resulting transports of thousands of Warsaw people to camps or forced labour sites inside Germany. But now, let us enter again into a subjective history – one that has been experienced and testified to; into the record of an individual memory, which has remained from our meeting:

I have to tell you how I lost the number 102. The transports were coming to and fro. The transports were so numerous toward the end of the year '44 that, // in '44 already, // that no room could be found for them anywhere. Three people were lying on each plank bed, there was absolutely no food available for them, so they sent [them] further on. And those whom they halted to do work, who were fit... // they changed the entire records. And here, this one's crossed out from the first transport, that one's crossed out... .. 102 is there. And there were the mates, they were from the first transport, they ran that administrative office. "Cross that out!" ... And I got the number... // A new numbering. I was given the number 46653. That number saved me. ... For, had they not deleted... // 'Cause I was taking cover anyway, for there were incidents like: "*Lebst du noch?* – Are you still alive?" This was year '43. Such was one *esman*, pretending to be a good man, as if: '*Lebst du noch?* – 'Ja' // So that I only was invisible. I had no right to live.

It is impossible to reconstruct the altered number situation exactly. Historians have found that in January 1944, the Gusen inmates were included in the files of the central camp of Mauthausen, and this entailed a revision of the prisoner numbers. Indeed, many accounts of the prisoners who were subject to such renumbering simply mention it, in passing, as an episode – one of the top-down instructions issued by the commandant staff. Here, it is completely different. It is impossible to determine whether my Interviewee refers to this particular procedure, or some other situation of unofficial change of the number. This is not, however, the essential point about this jagged, dynamic, emotion-imbued reminiscence. This is, rather, the testimony of a concern that accompanied the unexpected loss of the status of old prisoner – one of the first, actually, with a particularly low number attached to him, which was very telling to everyone around. Telling and legible, even before it could be clearly read – even at a distance, a three-digit number sewn onto the camp's striped clothing must have attracted attention due to its shortness. But once changed into a completely ordinary, typical one, the prisoner's belief in the extraordinary power of this chain of figures was not upset; a power extraordinary enough to save him from death. The related sentence is uttered twice, and with great emphasis. Of extraordinary importance is the reminiscence of his colleagues from the first transport, the other old prisoners who at that moment climbed higher

up the camp hierarchy – as they were ‘scribers’, running ‘that administrative office’. This is not visible in the transcript: when reminded of them, my Interviewee smiles kindly, warmly, as if he were talking about his closest friends or family. This comes as a trace of solidarity among the oldest inmates, the camp’s ‘founders’ or ‘builders’, which dates back not to the beginning of their camp route – nothing is said of it here – but from the end of it, the moment when they could regard one another as the ‘old prisoners’ or ‘low numbers’. For themselves, for each other and for the others, they formed (as testified to by numerous accounts of those others) a separate, better-initiated group. Not without reason: with a few years spent in the camp, they were indeed well initiated into the strategy of how to survive.

Interesting, although perhaps typical in terms of how memory operates, is how the number replacement episode becomes interrelated with an earlier situation where an SS-man expressed his astonishment at seeing a prisoner with a very low number still alive. This might however have been derision, rather than astonishment. And this rationalises and renders legitimate the conviction that the replacement number was life saving. Yet, a moment earlier, we heard that a number so low aroused respect – including among the camp’s staff, or at least this was the reason why its holder was ‘reckoned with’. Where does this contradiction come from? From the camp world, perhaps. The task of the memory (and narration) is to add sense/meaning: a sense of survival, in this particular case.

Atypical situations tend to be memorable, which is true also for the camp universe. Especially if accompanied by strong emotions. For my Interviewee, one such situation was his removal to a neighbouring camp in the last months before the liberation. Gusen II, the site Leon Ceglarz was transported to, is reproduced by the memory of a number of Mauthausen system inmates as a subsequent step to hell, the worst place of all: overpopulated, makeshift, made in a hurry, in a slapdash manner. The following narrative piece does not have much to do with this generalisation, though. Its dominant tenor is the memory of the speaker’s own experience of the place – which differs from the memory of most ordinary inmates.

And I went to Gusen II with this number. This gentleman who, // because of whom I’d had a narrow escape from death, // because of him and Pastewka, // was the ... camp *Schreiber* there. He could speak the German language perfectly – a Poznań man. He searched for assistants to the barrack scribes. Assistants! Well, I already knew the German language then. I say [to myself], ‘There are no parcels coming in, what am I going to do? I am completely new [here], such a high number. They’re sure going to do me in, chop, chop.’ I went to, // to the *Schreiber*. Well... Well, and I registered for it: ‘I should like to go there, as assistant to the *Schreiber*.’ ‘Cause, there was need for a... // The barrack... // There were thirty-nine barracks in Gusen II – they were just completely different. Long, large, bigger, but, the same thing – hygienically, zero.

The narrative on the passage to a new camp does not concern a new trajectory – suffering, inability, pressure exerted by external circumstances. That passage was a difficult choice, but it was a step that depended on the narrator and called for his initiative. The external context evoked in the background, within which the event

was set, and the reference made to the inner dialogue explaining and, somehow, giving excuse for that decision, suggest that the task was not easy. Neither is it easy today, to remember and tell a story about: the taking and holding of even a slightly privileged position within the *kacet* hierarchy does not form part of the collective memory of the *Lager* experience. Or, even of the inmate group memory. It makes complex the schematic image of (the) camp – as solidified in our imagination – built upon an absolute opposition between the victims and the perpetrators. It implies the danger of relativisation, and therefore it costs much effort to evoke one's own experience when it does not fit the scheme in question.

This privileged function of assistant to the *Schreiber* (scribe), attained over the years of one's camp term, has not abolished the other role of observer/witness. Again, Leon's story of himself interpenetrates the story about the others and the camp's reality.

There were, primarily, those from the other camps... .. Russians, a lot of Russians, those who had survived. A lot of Jews. And yet a lot, all the same... // I could tell you too how it was sorted out with them... of the Jews, // Swiss, Spanish, Italian... Horrible. Such a, such a mongrel! The *kapo*, a Czech he was. Ah – he was killed too. He wanted to be a *kapo*, he had a *Winkel*, and he, those, // those Jews... 'We're not going to move them! Here, by there!' ... They were digging, those, as fast as they could. But even if they got inside, the *kapos* counted on it. The sticks, like, shovel sticks, and he'd run from one Jew to the other Jew, from Jew to Jew. (And we worked at a different section there.) And back again. They were murdering by whipping. They murdered. That was a method too. An obnoxious human method. That fucker is dead.

The testimony provided at this particular point probably refers to some other moment, when my Interviewee worked at digging the pits, and not as a scribe assistant. However, the memory activated this image at that very place, ignoring the linear time. It is not part of my task here to verify the chronology of events, or to determine their order: this is a task for a camp chronicler. I am interested in something else – namely, in the fact that the experience of being an (eye)witness may prove most afflicting, even if sixty years have passed from the event of the story. Along with a number of fragments of multiple accounts, this one is a clear case of such a situation. The testimony appears incomplete, incoherent, 'torn up' – and particularly deformed if we limit ourselves to the written-down text. Again, much more is visible in the video, but this is not about words – the words have been transcribed in detail – but about the silence, pauses, emotions reflected in the speaker's face. In this multi-level communication, the spoken words are rather a guide, and sometimes merely landmarks that lead to today's traces of this witnessing experience.

Recorded in the memory, the fragments evoke the scenes of lashing of other prisoners, taking place somewhere alongside here, in the background, are not completely detached from a broader context of the camp narrative, contrary to the first impression. The 'Russians', 'those who had survived', and the Jews, of whom there was 'a lot, all the same', belong to a larger story about the camp, where (at

that moment of its existence) the Russians and the Jews were annihilated in a particularly cruel manner. The awareness that tormenting and killing them diminished, albeit a little, the risk of his own death, lies deeper still – in the very fact that the narrator is a Polish political prisoner having served several years inside.

The function of scribe assistant offered a privileged position, releasing him, in practice, from doing any other work, enabling him to save his forces, and even to stay inside the barrack. The condition for such a privilege was an informal relationship with those who stood higher in the hierarchy, being directly responsible for the condition of the SS-men's barrack.

I remained at the barrack, for I guarded the barrack, whilst the *Schreiber* submitted the report I had prepared. And, in exchange, I wouldn't go to work. Sometimes, they would send [me to do a job], when some furious *esman* appeared. Thus, I had to hide then, and if I didn't hide: 'What are you doing here? Off to work!' But I did spend most of the time at the barrack. And that saved me.

In fact, in the unstable world of the camp, such a position could not ensure complete safety, either. An unguarded moment, a small error in the calculations could mean not only the loss of this position, but the loss of one's life. Perhaps this is why the following singular, unusual episode occupies a much larger place compared to the descriptions of the ordinary, routine tasks related to the function of scribe assistant:

My tasks as assistant to the scribe ... included keeping records of all those who were at the barrack. I [once] made an enormous screw-up. During the roll call, I could stay alone at the barrack, 'guarding the barrack', it was called. The *Schreiber* and the barrack chief went off to submit the report; the *Schreiber* took the data from me, he wouldn't dramatically overwork himself, and one time he runs up: 'Listen, there's a prisoner missing in our barrack'. And that lack was threatened with gassing. 'So many years have I survived, and now they're going to finish me?' I'm counting, counting, checking – now, should be OK. He'd run back once again, and again the count is wrong. The third time, he says to me, 'Well, I'm going the last time, the next time, you go.' 'Then, I won't be coming back here!' And I noticed an error in the calculation itself, for there were a couple of items, *Kommando* such and such, there and there, there was something wrong with one of the *Kommandos*; I added [the missing element] at my own responsibility, and they accepted it too: 'That's it, this is in order, this is what it should be like.' With a relief sighed I, the scribe sighed, the barrack chief sighed, who promised me twenty-five [lashes] if that's not OK, but, well, he was satisfied that everything turned out alright.

This expressive scene from the final period of his imprisonment, recalled by my Interviewee during both our meetings, is so strongly marked and not only by its out-of-the-ordinary character, which helps fix it in the memory. Perhaps the other reason for making it part of the narrative was the need to communicate that the function he performed did not eliminate the threat of death that accompanied the rank-and-file inmates. This is how the privileged position, established temporarily

at the end phase of the prisoner's career, whilst hard to integrate within survivor's legitimate story, becomes integrated with the remainder of the camp-related experiences. The narrator considers it apt to excuse himself because of his role of scribe assistant, to find some grounds for it. The error made in a calculation and its plausible consequences facilitate this.

Quite a peculiar fragment in my Interviewee's story was the story of his psychological breakdown, loss of belief in rescue, in the sense of continued combat for survival, in his own philosophy of salvation. This is a difficult moment – not so much in terms of expressing it, perhaps, but to put it into words and communicate it.

I had, // like every one of us, I had my ups and downs when in the camp, in the sense that I was completely fed up with everything [at some point]. When even, // even, already, // only there already started, // the parcels started coming in, that was year, perhaps, '42, maybe even '43, I can't tell you exactly. Somewhere in the middle there, in any case. A sort of breakdown occurred. I was no more a *Muselmann*, let me tell you this straight away. I wasn't a *Muselmann*, but such a breakdown occurred in me. That was, after all, three thousand days, each day being donated by God. ... I said to myself, "I've had enough of all that, so many of my colleagues are dead, maybe I'll throw myself onto the wires." ... That was barrack twelve, or thirteen – I can't remember, one of those barracks. And there was such a lousy barrack chief there. And I went out, went out with this thought to that way leading, leading to the electric wire fence. This is a genuine fact. I'm meeting someone, a mate from the camp, and probably from the transport... A Silesian, that's for certain, and I'm saying to him [he asks], 'Where are you going, so early in the morning?', for that was still before the wakeup call, it was still dawn, [I say to him:] 'I have nothing to live for, so many have been killed, I am half-dead here, the parcels rarely arrive, I'm not going to survive.' In short, I broke down. And he's saying to me, 'You prick, you've been through so much', that's his way of putting it. 'You prick, you've been through so much, and now you're about to spite yourself?! Whom? Yourself? Making the Germans happy? They're getting...', I'm sorry, I'm not going to utter the word, 'their ar-... kicked, and you're going to fling yourself to the wires? You'd been better off doing it earlier!' That's what he [said] to me. He grabbed my hand: 'Off you go, back to the camp! Don't dare think of it.' And that's what it was like...

These last sentences are spoken with much agitation; the narration is discontinued, suspended for a while. Silence complements what has not been put into words.

The episode of attempted suicide introduces a dissonance into his own biography, the camp segment included, as it may cause its end. To preserve the continuity and coherence of the narration, distance is needed from that event, for the narrator from himself as he was at that time. Such a distance is produced by the dialogue between the two prisoners, which the Interviewee constructs (using, probably, some scraps of a conversation that might actually have taken place). The scene's main character becomes not the surrendering suicidal inmate but, instead, the other man – the angel he comes across, who saves the narrator through his powerful belief in the sense of life – even in the camp conditions.

The agitation and silence that close this fragment of the narrative are unexpectedly broken by yet another story of survival. Although this story concerns a completely different situation, occurring at a different moment along the camp route, it is introduced at this particular moment as it perfectly complements the former one, transforming both stories into an illustration of a positive conviction about Silesians which took shape in Leon's mind during his imprisonment. As in a number of other moments in this autobiography, narrating the specific occurrences is not limited to recalling them but also – or, perhaps, primarily – serves to substantiate one's own convictions, interpretation, and belief.

And another time, I had an interesting incident with those Silesians, still them. Or perhaps it was this same Silesian. This was already in 1944, there was just a handful of us remaining, but, given the camp reality, it was still quite a few. I had pneumonia, I think. A 39 degrees fever. I had no medicine, I had no contacts, save for one man from Plock, Dr Śmigielski, a pharmacist, actually But he was at the Russian quarantine. No medicine. I was dying, in short. And I got, // some Silesian, this could've been Bógdol, I suppose; ... he so reviled [me?] then, good heavens! And I'm waking up in that fever – I slept on the bottom plank bed then – I'm hallucinating, feverish, he's coming, but not so much that I wouldn't understand what's on, so he's coming: "Here are your drugs, drink them, now take them once again, and drink again." He gave me the medicine, and I had to go to work. And I got up, and went to work. And, essentially, I don't even know today who had brought me that medicine. I know it was a Silesian; perhaps it was that Bógdol. And therefore I have great respect for Silesians. ... You can count on Silesians, always. They may be harsh but they have much warmth and human understanding inside.

There is probably no camp account that would neglect the moment of liberation. This is the key reminiscence of camp survivors, evoking an important biographic turn in their lives. Such a reminiscence is shared by my Interviewee, who constructs a dense narrative about the event. It shows a primarily collective experience, one that is shared by all the inmates who survived to meet the moment. Based on this narrative, it is difficult to reconstruct what the narrator's direct experience actually was:

As I am nearing the end, I would like to tell you about the end of the camp. On 4th May, in Gusen, // Gusen; // ah, right, the *esmans'* crew had been replaced before then, by Wehrmacht, by those, by those who were conscribed – the *Volkssturm*, excuse me. At that time, also the bigger [i.e. higher-ranking] *kapos* ran away together with those, those Gestapo-men. Not all of them. Not all of them. And that *Volkssturm* didn't prove that good. They would come over, indeed, and we talked together then. But, he shouted. So, once a German, always a German, what are we talking about?

These closing sentences polemicise against the dominant pattern of *Volkssturm* – allegedly, a group of poorly armed, acquiescent old men who were told, after the SS crew left the camp, to watch the prisoners and keep them quiet before the American troops arrived. In contrast to a number of other former inmates when recollecting

their last moments in the camp, my Interviewee does not oppose those new units assigned to keep order with the previous, SS team. They came over to talk to the inmates, but, more importantly, shouted at them. Although the *Volkssturm* squads guarding the camp were mainly Austrians, they only reconfirmed the narrator's stereotypical conviction that 'once a German, always a German'.

But, back to that 4th of May, the year '45, then already under the rule of the *Volkssturm*, not the *esmans*, we can see that the Germans are leaving the barracks. They're simply fleeing. Fleeing. All the others can see it – not only my barrack. For my barrack was positioned at the apex of that enclosure. I can see – the Germans are fleeing! They didn't show up that day; // one of the *Volkssturm* didn't show up that day. They're escaping, escaping... but that's only the fourth [of May]. Nothing happened on that date, the fourth. On the fifth, there's no one at night! Instead, there's an American tank going along the roadway. I could see it with my own eyes. An American tank, and another following it. I was in Gusen II then, unfortunately. It drove into the yard, // the Gusen I yard, the roll call yard. It smashed up the gate, and drove in.

The above fragment of the account goes beyond a fact-based narrative concerning the moment the camp was liberated: the individual testimony interpenetrates here with the collective experience – the 'I can see' with 'the whole barrack can see'. Although it is not suggested by the transcript, the video recording shows how important – more important perhaps than the words being uttered/having been noted down – are the narrator's mimics and gesticulation. The recollection of the moment of liberation triggers intense emotion. The smile, joy on his face, the route of the American tank approaching the camp gate being outlined by the movement of his hands tell us more than the concise and dry sentences left on paper.

Yet, these positive emotions are immediately dampened by the subsequent images activated by the memory.

And then, that black side of the camp began. As for myself, I am not as ashamed as I sense a certain ethical desire, from the standpoint of a man's attitude to his peers. I am not a German, I am not a *kapo*, I was not a *kapo*, was not an *esman*, so I don't have to be like them. The squaring of accounts started with those *kapos* who, so to speak, had been well merited. Well, the outcome was miserable for them. This is how I would generally put it.

Instead of a narrative description of the subsequent events, we only have the problem evoked – a problem that irks my Interviewee, probably all the more now, when far removed from those events. He distances himself from the lynch mob law applied to the tormenters, the incidents that took place after the liberation. He would not consent to a transferral of the rules prevailing in the camp to the time of liberty. He actually does not tell us exactly what went on in there, and recalls no specific situations. What he clearly communicates is, in turn, the distaste, and indignation, with the underlying fear that the camp may have wrought moral havoc on those who survived.

It is only at this moment that a narrative starts of the first moments of freedom, individually experienced. In the chaotic description of those moments, the narrator regains control over the course of the events. The collective experiences of sustaining, suffering, experiencing are replaced by individual decisions and actions. The narrator regains control over his biography.

And we gained our liberty. What did liberty look like for me? That Orlov, the Russian, and the two Russians, his aides, ... my *Schreiber*, and myself... // and two others, I should think. We are going to Linz. The gates are opened. Everything's in order. There, we meet our colleagues from Gusen I. Exchange, talks, the joy of all creation, as they say. We raided a rabbit warren: 'Leon, Leon, are you asleep?! We've got a rabbit.' They boiled potatoes with the rabbit. And with that rabbit leg, I set off to Linz. 'Cause I had eaten my potatoes, and knew that one had, in any case, to somehow secure himself. A camp-time custom, a silly one. And, we're getting there. We're walking along the roadway, some went by train....

And the road gets bifurcated there. One heads toward Budejovice, Czechoslovakia, and the other one heads toward Linz, [then] under the American occupation. Says Orlov, 'Come, go with us! Our people are there, our kinsmen, they won't let anyone hurt us.' 'No. I'm going with my mates.' 'Cause most of my, // I didn't want that either, anyway... no. ... And I went to Linz, well. The first thing we saw, we were hungry already – I didn't have a fare or a ride, we were on foot – me, the *Schreiber*, and those two from the Gusen II camp. ... We're going. Where to go to around here? The [railway] station's ruined, looking the very picture of woe. The carriages smashed up. The people are searching, looking around the carriages. Of course, we joined in too. I dressed up in a regal garment, I had a rather nice jacket, you know, the shoes, not that bad, that I exchanged to have, I saw the number on, the armband, I made a white-and-red armband (that's not me, someone else did it there). But that, at a later time. And, the first day – where to stay? We can see – there's an MP car going along. American one. Let's follow it! They're entering. They drive close by the gate of the *Gasthaus*, that is, a hotel or beer hall – whatever name we give it – the gate opens, and we follow them. And that's it. And, well, he spoke English, that *Schreiber* of mine. I've got his name on the tip of my tongue. And he remained there, with the American army. With him, they got along.

And three of us went, along the same street, which was called Gürtelstrasse, seized whole floor of an abandoned deserted Austrian dwelling. What it was like there, I'm not going to say... It was good. ... Compared to we what had been in, of course. We were not hungry, anyway – that's the first thing, we could merchandise, for there was a house, that floor, // the housekeeper happened to be the owner. And Linz was heavily bombed. A cacao-choix factory was there. I'm not sure if you know what cacao-choix is? A liqueur, such a, scummy liqueur. But, it was en vogue at one time. Bucketfuls of it. I got drunk then. I got sick then, for I had tasted no alcohol for five years. 'Eat it, drink it! Let's have fun! We're alive!' Alive we are. We were there for some time indeed.

And we had various adventures there – with the American soldiers too. Positive and negative ones – and I have preserved those negative ones. Why? Because, they took my bike in Linz, and they destroyed that bike, they took away my vodka which I was carrying over and which my Silesian mate was making with sugar, he was a chemist. And I was carrying, // carrying it from the general camp, for I was in that general camp, and he was on the other side of the Danube and he stopped by that same Danube port. And there, by the vessels... what women there were arriving! You could have bought a woman for a piece of bread – literally. I didn't yet feel such a need, I was too weak. In any case, I could go to Vienna at that time, I could go then – since my wife was born in America, she had a brother in America – I could go to America... The trip was taken to the home country [instead]. ... We went through, and reached the homeland, via Budejovice.

The reminiscence of those first days of freedom recalls a number of episodes, scenes, situations, which altogether form a chaotic mosaic that makes up an ordered chain of events. This long description testifies to the historical events taking place in bombarded Linz, but to an even greater extent, to the world being experienced by the narrator. Moments before, he had been behind the camp wires – in a world full of bans, instructions, official and unofficial rules. Now, they are all gone, and the confused man has been thrown into freedom. Carnival time had come: social rules rejected, new roles assumed. Wandering across the city, changing clothes, plundering deserted warehouses, trading, drinking alcohol, making love... A plethora of adventures. A state of deep anomie, using Durkheim's sociological language. The description is full of unclear points or concealments, empty spaces, left to the listener's conjectures and imagination. The narrator's censorship is at work.

In this chaos of various experiences, not all of them are equal in weight. The choice between leaving for America (which for a multiyear prisoner of a Nazi concentration camp was certainly possible at that time, even without the help of his wife's brother) and returning to Poland was a biographical crossroad. The choice was crucial, irreversible, and had an essential bearing on Leon's whole life afterwards. The central character of his account may not be aware of it yet, but the narrator certainly knows it, and he projects this knowledge onto the past. 'The trip was taken to the home country': this sentence concludes the first stage of life in freedom – the stage of initiation, reversed quarantine. This sort or phrase contains a measure of melancholy, some doubt as to whether the return to Poland was a good choice. But, again, the doubt comes from today and does not reflect a hesitation in that past moment. The narrator was on his way back to the home country. Only afterwards, when inquired by me, he would say he also returned to his mother, wife, and child.

The first moment after he crossed the Polish frontier in Dziedzice is a sacrosanct moment in my Interviewee's memory, the moment in which he experiences sacred things – combined with prayer in a church, a conversation with God.

The train stops. The station is Dziedzice, in Silesia. We get off, this is our country now. No exaggeration – I'm getting off with some petty, a kind of... I had some shoes, some

brushes, no idea why I was carrying them, a shirt, a kind of rucksack, anything. And, I had a blanket too. Such a good one. But my wife had to burn that blanket, as it was ridden with lice. A nice *esman's* blanket. I get off. I had been to a church before. It was a Roman Catholic church, but the service was done by the Germans. They were mooching about there. While in a church, I have to concentrate, contemplate, talk with God the Lord one-to-one. But here, in this case, once I got off that carriage, no exaggeration, no chutzpah whatsoever, I just kneeled, kissed that earth. And that was beautiful for me.

A sacralisation of this scene is meant to emphasise the continuity of his own national and religious identity. After five years at a concentration camp, he is back home – not only in the colloquial sense – his own place – but also in a deeper, identity-related sense: regaining himself – the Pole, a Catholic, a pre-war scout, altar-boy, teacher, soldier, etc.

This sanctified moment of return is made profane, all of a sudden. The solemn tone of the unfolding story peters out; with tears in his eyes, the storyteller evokes a completely different image of his arrival in Poland:

But a moment after, a moment after, a Russian extends his mitt, 'cause I can't describe it otherwise, toward that bundle I'm carrying. A Russian, ... not wearing a Polish uniform. ... I am a reflective person. And then, in my mind, there flashed, such a... that not everything there is, however, like they said, after the liberation. Delegates were arriving from Poland, delegates from England – I could go to England but I was fed up with the army, the war, and the camp. I wanted to come back to Poland. But I registered myself here and there too. Here, as an officer, and there, as an officer too. ... But who knows how my vicissitudes would have panned out.

The stress made on the Russian soldier and the accompanying gestures indicate indignation mixed with regret and pain: “Maybe I should have not come back, as the place is different from the one I left back in 1940; different after the liberation from before the return”. But it is too late at this moment to choose differently.

This expressive and symbolical scene over, the story regains its narrative character. Similarly as in a number of other accounts, the return home, to his family, marks a chain of adventures, coincidences, unexpected meetings with various people known from before the war. This is still a transient, unusual period, which is remembered and reported in a much more exact fashion than the later (and earlier) everyday reality.

I was back now. I initially stayed for a couple of days with my Silesian colleague, the one that had done much good for me. We were buddies, after all. Not sharing the barrack. He carried the stones with a, sort of, small locomotive, and you could bake your potatoes at his place, under the steam. ... He says, “Why are you rushing home like that, you're at your place already. Stay with me for a couple of days.” “Good, I'll stay for a couple of days.” We obviously had to get registered as residents before then with

the centre. And there comes a very interesting thing. The 'PUR'²⁵², our repatriation centre, which issued the passes and issued a free ticket to [get to] your place of residence. Not everyone would get it, not everyone. I didn't quite // pay attention to that, only afterwards. That one's like this, this one's not getting it, that one's not getting it.

Preference offered to just some of the former prisoners on their way home leads my Interviewee's memory back to the camp – to those survivors who would be punished once returned, rather than privileged. They would get the punishment they deserved, earned by their behaviour at the camp.

But the main one, who had survived the camp and reached Budejovice, was sued only afterwards. A Silesian. A Pole. Pre-war a non-commissioned officer. One of the worst. But he didn't beat me, for we had arrived together. He robbed me instead. When a parcel came, I gave, I gave, // a holiday parcel! // I gave him the parcel, to keep. I come along, he's devouring my cake, my lard, and I've got nothing. 'You've given it to me? Given to me?' But he saved me during that, that, // the time that Nowak man escaped.

For the narrator, the most appalling thing was not the lost content of the parcel and thus, the lost opportunity to get some extra food – robbing such consignments was standard practice in the camp conditions – but the fact that the deed was committed by an inmate he knew, probably a man from the same transport: a Pole, a Silesian, an NCO. None of these pre-camp roles, encumbered with the load of legitimate expectations from the others, could bear the camp-time test: this man turned out to be "one of the worst".

Having so digressed, the narration resumes its main thread – Leon's return to his family town and home, to his loved ones. This is almost always a very emotional and difficult moment in the survivors' accounts. Leon's case confirms the rule.

The place I arrived first at was Plock. I can remember crossing the bridge, as if it were today. The train went no further than Radziwie, but at least it did that. The bridge is crossed, and there, another experience – a bad one. I can see a primary, an elementary school mate of mine, with a rifle. I mean, not a mate, he was not my mate, but he lived next door. From my street – let's put it that way. 'Everyone off the boat!' They didn't take anything from us, those who transported us. I [was] from the camp, so he gave up. And from the others – oh yes, for the transport. // For the bridge was destroyed. 'All the packages, leave them there, leave everything in the boat.' And, come on, penetrate! He was searching it there. I say, 'What're you looking for in there? What's there? What's it that you like? This shirt? Go take it.' 'Enough, enough talk.' A mate from my street, a pigeon fancier; quite an experience.

The whole scene has been memorised so expressly, including the construction of the conversation that took place at that point, most probably because of the narrator's astonishment at the new situation he came across. And it was not because the

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bridge was destroyed – on his way from Silesia to Mazovia (and before then, from Mauthausen to Silesia), he had probably seen many ruined bridges, an ocean of material destruction; the point was that the once-domesticated pre-war universe he had experienced daily had changed beyond recognition on the level of interpersonal relations. The narrator himself is someone else now, compared to what he was before the war: he is a camp survivor. This is how he defines himself and this is the picture of himself that he sees in the eyes of the others, his acquaintances from before the war. These images and definitions have a bearing on the course of the interaction during the river crossing: “I [was] from the camp, so he gave up”.

And, lastly, the scene of the return home: very distinctive, vivid, imbued with emotion. Of the most powerful scenes that he remembered, this one, I think, is the most difficult to express. The effort he makes and its accompanying emotions once again show – still now, several decades later – how strong the social bonds with his close family and friends were. Not much is said plainly about it in the narrative as a whole, but this single scene has sufficed to realise the importance of these relationships for this Interviewee’s identity.

I eventually reached my home. At first, I met a mate: ‘Leon, you’re here at last?’ ‘Cause I returned rather late. I had stayed for quite a while in Linz. I can’t remember now if I returned in June, or in July. I really cannot remember. Or perhaps even in August? This is what you can find in the papers. ‘You’re alive?’ ‘I am.’ ‘Good.’ ‘Because they said, you’d gone away. Some said you were dead, others, that you’d gone away.’ And I’m saying, ‘I’m not dead, nor have I gone anywhere. I am here.’

This episode of meeting a colleague, an acquaintance, often comes before the actual welcome greeting with the family, particularly in the accounts of those survivors who had a late return, several months after their camps were liberated. In case no news was received from them for a long time, which was often the case, they were considered dead or lost. The war, and even more so the stay in a camp, gave grounds for such a presumption.

You walked toward Plock uphill, now there are stairs there, near the old church there, from the Vistula port side. ... I’m going to Płońska St., where we lived. I’m knocking at the door, some woman opens, I looking at her. ‘Who lives here?’ ‘Ah! Mr Ceglarz; you’re back from the camp. Your mother isn’t here anymore. Your mother is at a new dwelling.’ And indeed. My mother was shrewd enough to have seized a flat in one of the new, formerly German, blocks of flats. Just like all the others did. And these were the blocks, // it was a flat. My mother took up two rooms with a kitchen, and the bathroom was shared. And the other, // a second family, sort of, from the other anteroom. By way of digression, it was not a good move that she made, but never mind.

My Interviewee delays the culminating moment of this fragment of his narrative – the greeting scene, by constructing, in the background of the main story, the thread of his parents having moved house. As we learn, seizing German properties was considered a common, authorised practice, which was conditional mainly

upon the craftiness of the new Polish lodgers. If this is how it was considered, then this is probably how it was in reality.

His mother undoubtedly stands at the centre of this narrative fragment – her son's five years' stay in the camp did not weaken the key role of this figure in his autobiography. She continues to be the householder, and it is to her that the narrator is bound most strongly with. His own closest relatives, his wife and child, remain in the background. The return home is, in the first place, a son's return to his mother, and afterwards, to his father and brothers, and later still to his wife and child. The strongest emotion occurs when the memory evokes the first greeting with his mother, and then, with his father.

I cannot talk about it, for this is, such a, greeting with my mother. My mum was tidying up, mopping the floor. I had found the [house/flat] number, we greeted each other. And, Wiesio [diminutive of Wiesław]... – I'll skip the details now – Wiesio, that is, my younger brother, went to the station, for maybe I'd arrived. An hour, roughly, after the greeting, after having said the first words to each other, Wiesiu [*sic*] enters. This brother of mine, today a lawyer. I had left Wiesio a small boy, and here's a strapping lad, speaking with a bass voice. We hurled ourselves into each other's arms. The last meeting was with my father. It was like this: we did it the silent way, sort of, probably, but externally [i.e. this was only apparent]. My father understood this, my father knew what I had been through... And so did my mother, after all. My mother was praying, my mother... // My mother had illusions that someone was ringing the bell at night sometimes, that it must be Leonek [diminutive of Leon], back home.... Bullshit! And, well, this is how my beautiful moment with my parents started. Mum immediately let Staroźreby know. My wife came along. And there, again... I forgot to tell you that a kid of mine had been born. Just in the period of the occupation, in the year '40. The kid had been brought up too. I kissed, // I somehow forgot to say, // I kissed the tiny fingers of the four-week-old kiddie I look through the window. Mum says, 'Look, Zosia's coming.' This is my wife's name. Such a fanciable lady she was. Such a nice woman she was. When a young woman, she was even nicer. And I look and see, I had left a four-week-old infant, and there's a boy, five years of age, walking around.

Agitation, crying, pauses – all these are as important as words, here again. It is primarily these that connect us, as we follow the narrator, to the very experience of meeting his loved ones, to that particular scene. Only the outer shell of the events have been verbalised – along with scraps of knowledge and opinions from behind the main scene, from another time in this biography, although they were actualised right then. It is then that they enter the space of autobiographical memory and become part of the narrator's self-definition, of his identity – such as his mother saying prayers when he was imprisoned, or some inexpressible knowledge of his father about what his son's camp experience was like. The recollection of that post-war greeting is also a recollection of embarrassment, if not abashment: those meeting each other are the same people who bid farewell five years earlier, and have now grown into someone different. The newcomer probably

seemed transformed as well, arousing perplexity. They now needed to become accustomed to one another anew, and to learn about one another.

The greeting scene concludes the transitory phase of this biography – between the liberation of the camp and the post-war daily reality. These few months of 1945 are a time of peculiar biographical transformation, occurring after the disappearance of a trajectorial potential – collective as well as individual. The density and dynamism of the narration of this short period of life attest to its biographical momentousness. This was a time of intense reconciliation of the narrator's own identity, accelerated socialisation, learning new roles and interactions: following the five-year experience of being enclosed in the extreme totalitarian institution of a concentration camp, and with the changes that have taken place in the narrator's social universe, a simple resumption of one's self and a return to others from before the detention proves impossible.

The closing of this transitory and extraordinary stage of the biography and its detachment from the subsequent phase is very clearly marked: 'Well, a new life started then'.

Out of this new life, my Interviewee selects a handful of threads and will use only these threads to further construct his biographical story. All these threads are interconnected, intertwined, and pertain to virtually one dimension of his life – his professional activities as a teacher, pedagogue, educator. In more contemporary language, his career. There is no mention of his parents, child, or wife – this dimension, so important in the narrative of the pre-war period, has now completely disappeared. These first post-war years were, in the autobiographical memory of my Interviewee, a time of intense effort, enormous social involvement, putting all his energy into the building of a school, the construction of an educational system, making up for the backlogs.

The first thing I was sure to do was to register with the inspectorate. The inspectorate says, 'The school principal is there. ... Where do you live? In Staroźreby? Then, get yourself post-haste to him.' And, I got there, I went. ... Well, and I started a school education. Of myself at first. I was full of energy. To do something, do something. For somebody – for the school, for the youth. And the youth was not at all young, then. That youth was aged eighteen, aged nineteen – they had not completed primary school. I organised all this for them. ... Half a year has passed. Perhaps not even completely, they're taking Gołębiowski, who was a manager, to Warsaw, to an appointment there. He was an awful loudmouth. He had survived Auschwitz and Mauthausen. ... Well, and I took the position [replacing Gołębiowski]. Everything had to be arranged. [Starting] form the teachers, from the desks, those desks had to be made, the teachers co-opted, looked for, someone who's got some education, secondary-level. ... But I, well, finally had a primary school organised, and started organising a *lyceum* [i.e. grammar school]. To organise a *lyceum*, you've got to have a building available. Inspired, admittedly, by, // for he says, "What're you willing to have here, a *lyceum*? A building needs being thought of, then." "You have the gift of the gab, go talk to people." He talked to people, and they indeed consented

to be taxed, for the *corvée* [orig., *szarwark*]. *Corvée* – do you know what that is? *Corvée* is a voluntary, // as if, but... // you lend a horse in order to fetch a material, of that sort. And, Staroźreby, that's twenty-four kilometres from Plock. And it was very hard to access the materials. But the peasants said all right. There had initially remained two rooms in the Palace, for the upper grades, in buildings occupied before by Germans, such, wooden ones I put the teachers in one of them, and started building the school. And as I had my acquaintances, mates – one is a district head, another's director of a bursaries' boarding house, the other is, // later was a [Civil Militia] general.

This hyperactivity, need to act, to do work, the willingness to catch up on the years lost in the camp was not a rare attitude among those who survived a *kacet*; it reappears in a number of accounts, and has been recognised in various research studies, primarily those conducted by Professor Antoni Kępiński and his Krakow team.²⁵³ Along with the living memory of the post-war involvement, the broader social context in which these activities took place becomes apparent. This context is, namely, the universe of the disturbed structures of social reality, shaken by the war. In place of a report on how he took the post of teacher, on the actions fitting the existing structures, what we come across is, mostly, a story of a reality in a liquid – or rather, ruined – state; on structures that need being reconstructed through action. The latter have primacy, come ahead of the structures, although are not suspended in a void – after all, my Interviewee adheres to the image of the pre-war school where his socialisation as a student and teacher was accomplished. His decisions and his actions are probably informed by this image. We can also find a trace of the fact that chaotic, unstable social reality was beyond the scope of the narrator's immediate experience. He perceives the changes in the social roles and positions as sudden and astonishing, more so than in normal time; they appear to depend not only upon one's own resourcefulness but – already in the initial post-war period – on some external powers that take some people “to Warsaw, to be in office there”, others being shifted to the vacancies that were created.

As part of the school story, a more personal thread appears which, however, does not pertain to Leon's family – his family consistently remains absent in the post-war period narrative. The thread is evoked by the decor of the room in which we have met to talk. There are many of paintings hanging on the walls, and some – it appears – were painted by a colleague of Leon's, also a pioneering teacher.

253 Cf. the research of A. Kępiński and his team, whose results have been published on an annual basis in the dedicated ‘camp’ numbers of *Przegląd Lekarski* medical periodical. For more on this research and outcome thereof, see also: M. Orwid, *Przeżył... I co dalej?*, Kraków, 2006.

These paintings you can see here were painted, among others, by a teacher I had hired at my school. At the *lyceum* already He died recently and I bought these pictures. Some of them, his wife with whom I stay in touch, has offered me two for free. I gave him lessons: crafts and drawing. His wife, at whom I was making a pass, by the way, was a very handsome girl, she was a lecturer in Russian.

This is the only moment when a relationship with a woman appears in this section of the story – just as a background construction, in the form of an unfinished, suspended sentence, which embarrasses and intimidates the narrator, to an extent. This embarrassment instantly transforms into a smile, which veils the thread of taboo. The way this inconsiderate digression is extinguished is meant to retrieve the image of the self being built throughout the narration. Simply the possibility that the narrator may have had an affair with a friend's wife, even if such a thing not actually occur, would have been an irrelevant flaw in his self-image.

Even without the cutting edge of feminist criticism, it is clear how male-centric this story is. Women tend to appear extremely rarely; once they do, they are shown in terms of physical attractiveness. Such is the language used to build the scene where he greets his wife, and to evoke the image of a 'handsome' wife of a colleague. There is a sanctified figure of (the) mother, so strongly present in the first, pre-camp part of this life history. These only are exceptions confirming the rule, whereby the story-teller's universe, as recorded in his memory and (re)constructed in his narrative, is a male world, almost without women, and even if they appear in it, they are seen from a distance – save for the mother. This makes this universe similar to the camp universe.

It also turns out that one's own camp-related past is not really an extraordinary discriminant – there are more survivors in the new reality. The narrator does not lose sight of the fact that, unlike him, not everybody had believed that the time lost while in the camp could be made up for by means of strenuous effort, intensified activity, complete involvement. Or, even if they did not believe so, they behave as if they shared this conviction. The narrator catches sight of those who have been crushed by the weight of their camp experiences; those who had returned but are not strong or fit enough, and who do not have enough will to build their lives anew. They only want calmness. We cannot estimate who amounted to a larger share, all the more that neither of these attitudes was necessarily durable. Importantly, both have appeared within the narrator's scope of experiences.

I also had mates from the camp who have grown senile. They came back from the camp, and wanted no school, no management, you leave them alone, they come from Silesia and are going back there, to where they belong.

One of the central threads of the professional career story is its interrelated political involvement, or rather, manoeuvring between involvement in politics and keeping a distance to it. Membership in the peasant party, which after 1949 became a satellite of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), is reported on as opposing the political system, or at least its mainstream.

I was, // I was a member of PSL [i.e. Polish Peasants' Party], later, ZSL [i.e. United Peasants' Party].²⁵⁴ This was my political development, and I was in touch with them. That wasn't a welcome thing, for I was a man recognised by the peasant milieu. They wanted to win me over. They called me to go to Płock. There was a secretary ..., and the other one, who died not long ago, I'm not going to say [names]. 'We can give you an option here, // you are managing things quite well. We will take care of you, transfer you to another post, a better one.' And me, 'I can cope with it as it is. I can do what is good for the environment, what is good for the people, the people like it. And I think, the party I belong to, I will stay with.' 'Yes, yes, you can stay.'

As in many other places, the narrator again constructs a dialogue between the dramatis personae, the characters of the play he took part in. It seems of less importance whether those were exactly the words used – we have no access to them, they vanished the moment they were uttered. The only thing liable for analysis is the image the Interviewee builds. The image in which his membership of the United Peasants' Party – done out of conformity and to facilitate, if not enable, his appointment to the post of headmaster of the local school – is invoked as a sign of his service to the people, of doing good, working at the grassroots level. In the narrator's subjective perception, his whole career as a teacher or, in broader terms, pedagogue in the pre-war period had a sense when it was done with devotion and involvement in the People's Republic of Poland, as it was experienced by the narrator in terms of a service done to the youth, the home country, and God. This is how it is remembered and interpreted today.

But since that time, chicanery of one sort or another began, this way or that way. Remarkable difficulties. What they didn't like was that I ran the scouts in line with the old rules. What they didn't like was that when [His] Excellency [actually, Eminence] Zakrzewski, the bishop, Ordinary of Płock, passed through Staroźreby, I prepared for him, with bikes, // a bicycle *banderia* [i.e. escort of honour, in regional costumes]. The peasants prepared a horseback, and my scouts a bicycle *banderia*. What they didn't like was that my scouts took part in the construction [*prob.*, of decorative processional altars] for the Corpus Christi And they kept guard. And that such a guy is respected, he's successful in one thing or another. ... The conditions in which I had it built were harsh. I had to manoeuvre, in order to be, // so as not to let myself be completely trampled on, and to make everything good for the youth and the community. ...

GS [i.e. with the Communal Cooperative],²⁵⁵ they made me a chairman. In the GS, I also set [things] up usefully, for I knew how to talk with the peasants. I still have a

254 The United Peasants' Party (ZSL) was a Polish peasants' political party existing between 1949 and 1989. Subordinated to the PZPR, ZSL implemented the policies of its 'mother party' with respect to rural affairs.

255 The 'Sampomoc Chłopska' ['Peasants' Mutual Help'] Communal Cooperative is a cooperative production, trading and service enterprise set up in rural communes

proof that I am a member, chairman of the supervisory board. ... In any case, when there was the school opening ceremony, the opening of the school building, then I first had to make a sacrifice, otherwise the peasants would've snapped my head off. And I had agreed with the village mayor that we're first doing the consecration, inviting the parents, and later, two hours later, Minister Grubecki would arrive, a representative of the [regional] board of education, a representative of the Starosty office, with whom I got on well. I had some connections. And I so made it so that Peter has been paid without robbing Paul. I had to do it like that.

This period returns in the autobiographical memory as a time of veritable balancing, a skilful game played with/against the contradictions; or, rather, several parallel games. Some elements of this game are taken, as it were, directly from his pre-war experiences, which is clear already at the level of the words used to reconstruct the same (the 'bicycle *banderia*' and 'Excellency, the bishop'). Along with it, there appears a completely new language, and a different game: 'GS, they made me a chairman', 'I had some connections'. Added to it is an extraordinary dexterity, flexibility, ability to immediately swap roles, snap through to another game, also on the linguistic level – a solemn school consecration ceremony instantaneously turns into a ceremony of greeting the notables, with the minister at the head. The post-war world of this provincial intellectual's social experience proves to be very different from his world before the war. The subjective perspective of the individual being researched could be abandoned for a moment here, to perceive the processes in question from the outside – that is, through more objectivised or, rather, intersubjective concepts concerning the period. Then, we can see not only, or not really, the degradation of the pre-war provincial intellectual, but rather, his metamorphosis: this social role, rather clear some time ago, becomes a cluster of many, seemingly non-reconcilable roles, which nonetheless remain integrated within the biography. When juxtaposed, these two perspectives – the subjective one and the external, objectivising one, shed some light on the multidimensionality and complexity of that reality, particularly in its local, provincial scenes, which are not quite easily liable to assessment, classification or judgement. Things appear somehow more ambiguous, floating, vague and blurry.

This is one occurrence that has been evoked as a climax of the winding road of the post-war period, described here as manoeuvring. I am referring to a mere episode, a stumble while manoeuvring, but this point sets a symbolic border between the admissible involvement and the functioning within the official structures of the time, on the one hand, and the individual action, being the fulfilment of the values deemed personally dear, and thus contradicting the conciliatory adjustment of attitude on the other.

in the time of the People's Republic of Poland (a monopoly trader in the rural areas then, the enterprise is still in operation today).

And, I took the liberty of criticising the board of education, that they're not lending me the teachers I needed. A lady journalist – just like I would be interviewed by you – I told her about it. I made a colossal tactical mistake, for you could not criticise the [communist-]party authority then. At that time, the party authority and the administrative one were merged. 'A school like this deserves help', this is the article. ... And two weeks later, a board delegate comes over to visit me at my office: 'This is the new principal.'

As it turns out, this was not a game, and the errors were costly: the invisible partner/opponent had the authority of bringing about *deus ex machina* solutions, and could make use of this authority. But this twist in the autobiography, so clearly apparent in the memory and so essential to the narrator's awareness, does not end in a breakdown, and is not shown as the starting point of a trajectory. There is no brooding on a defeat suffered or a degradation; instead, there is a positive experience that can be integrated within the autobiography as it provides an opportunity for a personal transformation, self-development, and for getting involved in scouting anew.

This might have been in the year '54, or even earlier, it was earlier. And I stopped being a headmaster. But I started being a teacher who began thinking about himself. I enrolled with [post-secondary professional] education courses for working people. And this time, instead of ... a holiday, [I went] to a scout camp. I joined training, educational and additional schooling courses.

Once again, the text deceives us a little here, as something important is missing in the written words, which is otherwise communicated by the image: these sentences are uttered with resignation, in a tiresome, aching voice, with no ardour, the final ones that talk of the training courses being accompanied with the gesture of a waved hand. This period of 'thinking about himself' was apparently not the happiest moment in Leon's post-war biography.

Continued, this story makes it apparent that retreating, making himself somewhat insignificant, gaining comfort by abandoning the need to 'manoeuvre' – so positively interpreted by the narrator – was but a transient state of waiting for the end. The change in the political situation on the national level, with the Thaw of 1956, finally enabled him to regain a more central position on the local scene. The Thaw had its provincial, local varieties, and it could bring about – this being a case in point – a thorough change in the framework of mutual interactions. Or, to be more specific, in the perception and experiencing of these interactions on the level of daily relations and relationships.

There came the year '56, quite an important date: Gomulka comes to power; the Thaw. Committees are being set up with the boards of education, which check for the regularity of the layoffs issued. ... There is a regular hearing, the witnesses, this, that, and all. And they find that Principal Ceglarz, // no, I was a teacher then, // has been unduly released as principal. I've got the document too. Then, what was I supposed to do? Reassume the post, perhaps? I could do, for I had good connections with the lady who

was head of the office at the Warsaw board of education. So what, was I to do with him, // expel him from the palace, as he dwelled in a palace, he had four kids, and have him hired as a teacher? I would then have had a cross to bear because of him. So, I'm saying to that director lady, // to the head of the board, vice-head of the board: 'Go fix something for me, because I'm not going to be here, nor will I constantly be stuck here, under his command.'

This new context could have led to a simple reversal of roles, to a reassumption of the office he held earlier, but the local space within which the relationships evoked by this narrator's memory exist and are performed is not conducive to sudden change. Direct, face-to-face contact with the other individual, the partner in an interaction, conceives of an ethical bond that constricts or, rather, transforms (by radically expanding) the spectrum of possible, admissible behaviours. In a big city, it is easier to avoid one another, eliminate unwelcome and embarrassing encounters, vanish in the crowd and, when eliminated from one game, join another. In a small town environment, where the relations typical to social bonds of the *Gemeinschaft* type have been superseded by those typical to *Gessellschaft* to a lesser extent, the resumption of the lost position turns out to be a difficult challenge for the returning individual if he is not willing to upset the imagined, implicitly assumed and recognised balance of the social universe; in this case, the complex universe of a provincial school.

Yet, what the memory evokes does not boil down simply to moral doubts, giving grounds to his refraining from taking more radical steps. It builds another image, which refers us back to earlier experiences – probably from the period of his withdrawal, his suspension. Although in chronological terms, this image should precede the rehabilitation episode, it appears right here, in the subjective autobiographical order. And this is indeed the right place: the image forms an interpretative background, provides self-justification for the situation that comes after:

All the more since he was picking holes in my coat, wherever he could. The largest hole he picked was during the social-political studies examinations. I failed the social-political studies exam for the first [time]. I simply failed. This historical materialism wouldn't get into my head. Too bad. Dialectical, // the dialectics, me, I like philosophising a little, I had a passing contact with philosophy somewhere elsewhere, and then I can have a talk with them on this subject. End of story! 'You have to retake. If you fail the second retake, then we'll have to consider it' Me, an old teacher, a September soldier, concentration camp prisoner, who made desks with the children, cut trees, climbed trees to... // cut the planks together with a carpenter... // anything possible, whatever, now he's got no right to...

Here, it appears that the 'additional schooling' has its hidden agenda in my Interviewee's memory. It seemed that a time of quiet suspension, release from a burdensome function, and fulfilment of his individual potential was what was happening. What comes over instead is an image of a troublesome, absurd examination, questioning, reducing an adult character to the role of pupil who is not able

to learn his assignment properly. He would never accept the exam failure, however grotesque it appears from today's perspective. An objection is raised, which probably remained non-verbalised there and then, but could have appeared at that time (or maybe later on). The arguments rationalising this objection do not belong to the circumstances relating to the exam. Nor do they pertain to the subject of the exam, namely Marxist philosophy. It is the war experiences, participation in the September 1939 Campaign, and imprisonment in the concentration camp that form the ultimate instance of appeal, along with the obvious case of professional practice. This former argument was probably not formulated directly at that moment, but this does not diminish its importance. What seems important is that it has been invoked in this particular context of the autobiographical account. This is indicative of the crucial role that these experiences – participation in the Defensive War of 1939 and imprisonment in the camp – have for their narrator: his self-definition, the image he produces of himself, his identity. These experiences are not only centrally located: their location is special, sanctified. This central argument does not tend to be abused by Leon – he resorts to it if all else fails, when any other arguments have failed and the matters of importance to his life have headed in an unwelcome direction.

In the situation being described, the reference made to the camp experiences was not used as a bargaining counter, but served instead as a permit legitimising the use he made of informal resources:

Well, and I passed that exam. True, they gave me a 'C', but I did pass it. For I had moved mountains in Plock, without that I wouldn't have been a teacher. [Those who helped me were] my camp mates, too. ... And I came over here, now as a vice-director.

The engagement as school principal in another town was an experience of promotion and banishment in one, and forms the last turning point in Leon Ceglarz's autobiography. It is followed by an elegant, far less detailed and less emotional mini-story about his employment at the new school, where he remained until retirement. These last images are dominated by a strong conviction that his work there was of value, reliably performed, and no less pioneering than his first job. Such a positive valuation is meant to emphasise a sense-generating role of this work in the context of his entire autobiography.

The school was large, desolated all around, please keep in mind that there was not a single small tree. No, there were the old trees. Some old trees. The school [was] half-built. But I [was] an expert in building a school, wasn't I? The sports ground – I was a councillor, and in view of the foregoing, I did everything... The school's proprietorship, up to the stream. ... Well, and I think that I have done something for this school. ... I was there from December of '56, until '70, or '72. This is my school, which I built!

The school is located a few dozen yards from the building in which my Interviewee lives. This explains the gesticulations he uses while saying these words. The narrator wants to set his account among the concrete topographical features, and the opportunity is at hand: the school stands right behind the window. Apart from

being proud of his work, a distance to this role being played, to the title of “expert in building a school”, which he granted to himself with an indulgent smile, is seen in this fragment – but only if we watch the video. Of importance for the narrator is also the fact that taking the post of head teacher did not imply a degradation of his predecessor. This apposition is essential, as it lets him feel right.

At that time, in the year '56, when I was being released, // moved to another post, the principal here was sacked. The thing being that I came here out of necessity, and he went to Warsaw to take a different post. Justice done, of sorts.

Leon's unrestrained narration of his post-war biographical experiences is not as dynamic as the stories of the pre-war years and the camp were. Thus, questions arise; one of the final queries concerns his involvement in the veteran milieu. This topic is not particularly important for the narrator, at the moment. This thread was omitted by him when freely constructing his autobiography; it may be that memory omitted it, or was not willing to expose it. This is what we may suppose, in any case, when considering the manner in which it appears in the narrative, elicited by my questions:

I was the founder of Association of Former Political Prisoners in Płock. Together with a priest, who is now dead. I have the identity card – the first one [i.e. number 1], only that I misplaced it when I moved here. They demanded that I paid the contributions. Later on, as the Association of Former Political Prisoners was merged with the veteran organisations, well, then I didn't enter myself [i.e. enrol with the new organisation] long. But, once merged, then, well, the veteran's rights have been valid as from the year '45. ... I was member of the board then, when I already made up my mind. When I was not the principal any more. I had more work to do, well, and they'd willingly accept a man like me. I was talked into it. I made up my mind, but I didn't like some of the company there, in the board. I resigned from the board. A general meeting, in public. [? He] comes along from Warsaw – and I'm elected again. And so on, over and over, up until now. Ten years, the eleventh year now I've been member of the board with the Provincial Association of Veterans of the Republic of Poland and Former Political Prisoners. A retired major! A scoutmaster of the Republic of Poland!

Here appears a trace of his early involvement, right after the war, in the Former Prisoners' Association, not yet subordinated to the authorities. This comes as yet another sign of how important the camp experience was. Still, we are not fully clear about the course his career took at the time when the whole veterans' and prisoners' movement was centralised and politicised within a single organisation that was dependent on the communist party (PZPR), i.e. the League of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy (ZBoWiD).²⁵⁶ This whole experience gets somehow

256 Two important studies have recently been published in Poland covering (inter alia) the issues of the self-organisation of former prisoners of Nazi camps after the war, the politicisation of veteran organisations, their centralisation within the ZBoWiD, and the role of this organisation as an actor of collective memory; namely: (i)

blurred in the narrative, and perhaps in the memory too. The official facade of ZBoWiD covered, as in this particular case, particularly from the 1970s onwards, common pragmatic membership in these structures which determined, it was supposed, the receipt of privileges, financial grants or support, even if they were not particularly significant. Such premises tended to be the actual reason for the members' formal involvement, particularly if the opening opportunity coincided with retirement, end of one's professional activity, and an increase in available time and energy. The period 1989–90 did not have to signify a distinct pause in one's individual experience. In 1990, ZBoWiD became the aforementioned Association of Veterans of the Republic of Poland and Former Political Prisoners. Along with it, a number of independent organisations for former prisoners and soldiers of various formations were set up or reactivated. Today, some twenty years later, many of those organisations, especially prisoner ones, have merged together – not formally, because each of them is registered separately, but on the level of real interactions, particularly in the local context: the same people meet there, often found in the same rooms, contactable on the same phone numbers. The decisive factor is their very generalised experience from some sixty years before – shared imprisonment in a camp being one of the options – the post-war splits lose importance as time goes on. The health conditions and potencies of the members of these organisations are now no longer sufficient to highlight, sustain or reinforce these differences and splits, nor is there a need to do so. Those increasingly few who are still living and have a need to cultivate these bonds are barely fit to meet and talk.

The involvement my Interviewee refers to causes no special pride in him: it is rather seen as a necessity, a duty he was encumbered with by the others, yet another type of service fulfilled for the others, a task exercised by the force of some inertia one has to submit to, half-heartedly. This is the reason why this thread emerges at the end, at the margin of his autobiography, and only when elicited. The two exclamations (and exclamation marks) closing this fragment are not marginal at all, however. Leon highlights his engagement in the military and in scouting with pride, as an essential constituent of his self-image, of his identity. Both lines of engagement are contrasted with an inertness of the camp veteran's attitude. The narrator positions himself at a remarkable distance toward the latter, and can say something jokingly at this point:

I am retired now, I am a disabled war veteran, category one. Deaf, blind I am, for I can only see with one eye. And, the stomach, you know...

The first part of this biographical account, the first four hours of its video-recorded version, are concluded by the narrator with a punch line. We do not envision another meeting, sharing the conviction that his 'whole' life has just been told. Schütze's

Z. Wóycicka, *Przerwana żaloba. Polskie spory wokół pamięci nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych i zagłady 1944–50*, Warszawa, 2009; (ii) I. Wawrzyniak, *ZBoWiD i pamięć drugiej wojny światowej 1949–1969*, Warszawa, 2009.

analytical language calls the punch line that closes and summarises a narrative a coda. My Interviewee has ignored my question about the ways in which his camp experiences have informed his life. Instead of giving a direct answer, he asks himself a question, apparently somehow similar but in fact belonging to a completely different level. Not the individual/existential level I had in mind when asking him the question, but, a historiosophical one. Such a shift releases my Interviewee from giving an answer to the question he perhaps found too difficult – the question I inconsiderately tried to encumber him with.

That a man is able to get another man into something like this, it boggles my mind. Why?! If you can notice, among the books I have, the biographies – on Hitler, Napoleon, Stalin, Mao Zedong... I am searching why a man is like that, can be like that, with respect to another man? What is it that causes an individual, otherwise indifferent, and a genius, on the other hand – in their own way, obviously; ‘a genius’, in inverted commas – to have the whole nation follow him, do so much evil, so many wrongs, put to death so many millions of people? So many thousands of people, // hundreds of thousands, // millions of people in concentration camps, or in the Soviet labour camps. ... Although, in my opinion, concentration camps tend to be spoken of less and less, and it is there that we have incurred the greatest losses.

This conclusion enables him to leave the autobiographical memory space smoothly, to pass from a difficult narrative about his own experiences to expressing judgements, opinions, and complaints. At this point, the narrator quits his role as (eye)witness, and assumes that of researcher. Once there, switching into an ordinary conversation becomes easy and safe.

As we later look through the documents and photographs together, commenting on and filming them, he does so with a distance, without the emotional aura which accompanied the autobiographical story. We resumed this narrative during the second meeting, which I have referred to many times already. Of course, each of us kept our roles, primarily those of narrator/the researched and listener/researcher respectively, who performed the interview as an interaction. The story then recorded only concerns Leon Ceglarz’s camp experiences; it is more detailed and denser now, forming a separate, self-contained whole and concluding with its own punchline.

As our second meeting was coming to an end, the moment the tape was recording the eighth hour of his testimony, or rather, of the process of its creation/composition, my Interviewee tried once again to confront the stubbornly reoccurring problem of giving a biographical sense/meaning to the fact that he had survived five years of imprisonment in one of the harshest Nazi concentration camps.²⁵⁷ He

257 What I have in mind here is the ‘regular’ concentration camps, rather than the extermination/annihilation camps. I observe this differentiation throughout this study, though in most cases implicitly: my Interviewees are former Polish prisoners of *kacets*, Nazi concentration camps. While mentioning ‘survival’, I do not refer to Jews surviving the Holocaust. In the case I do, I remark upon this.

searched for various rationalisations which would enable him to explain the camp-related fragment of his biography, to somehow integrate those experiences with the image of his own life, making it part of the autobiographical story. Let us once again refer directly to a quotation from this testimony:

And for me, man, // for me, faith, Divine Providence, was all. And I cannot explain to myself a whole lot of things – now, these are, say, clear things. I have found that a man can be an enemy to another man; do everything that is good to himself while not considering the other one, to whom he does genuine harm.

While in the camp, although I was not one of the ‘eminent persons’, but in those, // by the open door I stood, listened... to those beautiful poems, and this was also an element which somehow strengthened me, consolidated my personal conviction that I just have to survive. [LC refers here to listening to the meetings at which the inmates read out and declaimed pieces of poetry in one of the camp barracks, during their time off. (PF’s note)] And, one more element: I left a four-week old baby... I left, / I left the mother whom I loved so much, who had brought me up, I left a loving wife, I left the whole family. And, finally, I left Poland, bloody damn thing, the one I fought for, the one whose youth I educated. I wanted to be back... With will you can do anything. This is, such a, platitude, such a, stereotypical saying, but it was necessary in this case. With will, with will to survive. Not turning into a scumbag completely. For I am aware that myself, or my, // or my other mates who survived, they survived, one way or another, whichever way we’d put it, at the expense of the others, those who died. There is no doubt about it at all. But, am I?... // But I am not directly responsible for this. Neither me, nor the others are, who have survived. ... Are those who survived the best ones? No. Has justice been done? Again, no.

I do not intend to catalogue or analyse these attempts at explaining one’s own survival; they belong to completely different agendas, after all. It would probably not be too difficult to show their incoherence. Instead, let me refer once again to a video-recorded image that shows a very strong emotion, great agitation that prevents unrestrained narration, jerking and ripping it. This emotion culminates in the sentence on Poland, which he had left as though it were one of his dearest persons, uttered with great difficulty, with tears in his eyes. The mood with which he expresses this sentence, not to be reflected in a most accurate shorthand record, unveils before me and allows me to understand, albeit a little, some noble, pre-war variety of patriotism which is not quite well known to me from immediate experience (and which probably can no longer be encountered). The word ‘patriotism’ is never mentioned, but it does not have to be. The moment I encountered this testimony, I gained an insight into a world that is inaccessible to me, and completely different from mine – a universe experienced by my Interviewee.

The slogan ‘With will you can do anything’, extracted not much later from a throat tight with emotion, with no less difficulty but with a delicate smile, through tears, appears like a lifebuoy thrown from the outside, enabling him to find a way to get away from these strong emotions. My Interviewee cracks a smile that looks somewhat ironic: in the course of his story, he gave so many testimonies of human

and divine impotence, testimonies of mockery of any freedom or potency, any wanting or deigning. Such as, for instance, when he talked of his would-be suicide attempt in the camp. Still, he clutches at this lifebuoy, which he has thrown for himself, incredulously. He attempts in this way to subdue his agitation, resume a distanced, rationalised narration over which he will regain control to spin the story further on, rather than the other way round, until he arrives at a punch line that integrates his experiences, giving them a meaning, a sense, in the context of the entire autobiography.

The narrator is partly successful at this, his emotions are muted for a moment. Still, drawing coherent conclusions based on the personal experience, some lesson learned, or a punch line, is not an easy exercise. At the end, his memory evokes images that prevent any unambiguous lesson being offered for the future, in spite of the efforts being made.

I also don't respect certain, certain sayings, as they were, that... That saying, of which I said: that we are needed, and therefore have to live. It has been somewhat misunderstood, erroneously delivered in the camp. That is to say, the one who [was] uneducated, who did not stand for some figure, some attitude, was not a personality but an ordinary human instead, an ordinary ... member of that great coherency, which the concentration camp was then, such a one, // that one might have not been helped. For I have encountered such a[n attitude?]. Give some bread to the one we attribute some expectations to. What expectations? What kind of expectations were there then?

Looking back, my Interviewee cannot come to terms with those camp calculations, based upon diverse depictions and hopes, projected toward the future and often contradictory, the ones upon which human life could depend. Those strategies of survival are confronted with his own rationalisation of survival, which is evoked once again:

There were several things contributing to it: the psychophysical features, also one's health, the *Kommando* you worked with, the spiritual conviction regarding God – these are the things that strengthen humans.

He can see that this is also a later construction, into which one's own experience cannot be fully integrated, for as long as a recollection of the suicidal attempts at the camp, his own and his mate's, enter it: "These breakdowns are there, these breakdowns were there, these errors were there...". The experience eludes an exhaustive, conclusive interpretation, remaining impenetrable, to an extent: "As to a full answer to the question how I survived the camp, I am not in a position to tell you". How similar this sentence is to the one that was uttered a few hours before, at the moment the camp story began! It is worth recalling it now: "If I were asked by someone, 'How did you survive the camp?' I can tell you fragments: where I was, what *Kommando* I worked in, and so on ... but I wouldn't be able to give an answer".

The story has turned full circle, without offering a solution to the crucial puzzle. Instead of one message, we get another confirmation of what has been said in this

account many times yet: the concentration camp, as recorded in the survivors' experience and memory, conceals and/or reveals a complex, ambiguous world which is unexplainable and, in particular, hard to generalise in any way, with the experiences being so varied and the memory of the contrasts between the camp roles and positions proving so strong. Not just contrasts between the prisoners but also a split, cleavage (many of them) within one's own, individual camp experience as an old *Häftling*.

A story calls for a conclusion, though. While the biography goes on, an autobiography generated in the context of an interview, an interaction, must come to an end. An attempt at building a punch line based on an interpretation of one's survival ended in failure. What symbolically concludes this story is, rather, the hope, expressed by the narrator, that history – including his individual history – shall not be forgotten. This hope gives weight to our conversation, which is about to end. It is, also, a substitute for a happy end to the autobiographical narrative.

And this is what needs to be talked about, this is what needs to be recollected. And once we are no longer here, may this young generation at least... // not in order to put on airs, but in order for them to become aware that the nation is not only what it is now, not only this money, but the nation is also the history, and what the grandparents and great-grandparents have experienced.

On the surface of these words, we can find the traditional conservative conviction that history, as knowledge of the past, is an important constituent of a national awareness. A result of such a reading would be a push for an intensive, history-based politics, a pivotal task of which would be to encourage (if not drive) the youth to learn their history. A history told in a way that is meant to cement the national community. This is not an easy task without putting on airs – against which we can hear a forewarning.

Yet, there is a different reading of this daydream/push/testament that is much closer to me personally: one in which, instead of focusing on the word 'history', we pay more attention to 'what the grandparents and great-grandparents have experienced', or been through. The mention of history along with the experiences of grandparents within one sentence may be misleading. Is it not the same thing, really? It is not, even if somehow these elements are interrelated – and quite strictly so, as we see in this narrative again. A nation elaborated on the basis of the experiences of the grandparents (various grandfathers and grandmothers) – listened to, noted down, recorded, read and interpreted (rather than just rewritten and repeated) – appears less monumental, pompous, or martyrological. Stopping for a while to consider the grandparents' experiences, rather than satisfying ourselves with history and (the) nation, we gain a chance to understand them a little better. Not only as historical or national experiences but also, and perhaps primarily, human, existential ones, with which our grandparents coped, which formed them, but also crushed and destroyed them. And although these experiences are beyond any direct comparison with ours, this offers a prospect of rendering them potentially closer; it becomes easier to 'become aware' of what they actually were.

Our meeting, the autobiographical narration, the presence of a camera which recorded the process of recalling and constructing a story, and, finally, the recorded story itself, placed in the archive and made available to other scholars – all this is a manifestation of a similar conviction and belief that individual experiences are worth noting down, the memory of biographical experiences worth preserving. Somebody else may thus replay the recording some time, interpreted in his or her own language, and thereby updated. What language will this be? Will such an interpretation comprise the notions of history and nation, and, if so, how? There is no answer that can be given to these questions. And, there is no need.

II. Zygmunt Podhalański

Zygmunt Podhalański was born on 3rd January 1921, near Nowy Sącz. Before the war, he had completed his grammar school, passed the high-school exit exam, and been accepted into the University of Technology in Lwów (presently, Lviv in Ukraine); however, the outbreak of the war shut the door on his studies. He joined the September Campaign of 1939; demobilised, he returned to Nowy Sącz and became involved in conspiratorial activity. He worked with the Baudienst (construction service), and studied economy for a year. December 1942 saw him arrested; he was gaoled in Tarnów and from there, in February 1943, was transported to Birkenau and, subsequently, to Auschwitz. Directed to Mauthausen, he was next moved to the Linz I subcamp, where he worked at a steelwork. In the Linz III subcamp, he was employed on the construction of a windmill in a quarry and in clearing the city of debris. After the liberation, he remained at a transit camp in Linz, where he organised education for Polish children. After his return to Poland, he ran a printing business in Katowice, which he eventually had to wind up due to the pressure exerted by the communist authorities. He moved to Nowy Sącz again, where he joined a printing cooperative. He practised social work for many years, also managing a folklore ensemble and a film club, among other things. Mr Podhalański has been a very active member of the former war prisoner and disabled war veteran milieus.

I had two meetings with Mr Podhalański: in February 2006 and again a few weeks later, both times at his home in Nowy Sącz. Our first conversation produced a biographical account, which was also audio-recorded. This recording, running almost three hours, has been included in the International Slave and Forced Labourers Documentation Project, focusing on the vicissitudes of the lives of former Third Reich slave/forced labourers, and on the stories told about them.

I originally received Zygmunt's contact details from a colleague of his, who is the Polish representative to the Maximilian-Kolbe-Werk, an association that extends support, in a variety of ways, to former concentration camp inmates. My Interviewee managed the association's branch in his region, the area of the former Nowy Sącz Province (Voivodeship). However, the institutional or formal context of our first contact, over the telephone, soon took second place. Curiosity and a willingness to meet took primacy: on the one hand, the will to tell his story, and on the other, to listen to it and to have it recorded. Zygmunt was happy that I could visit him and talk to him. It was completely at my discretion to fix the date and time of our meeting.

When I knocked at his door on a drizzly February day, one of his close relatives opened, inviting me straight away to the upper floor of their rather small house. At the top of the steep stairway I was welcomed, with a vigorous handgrip, by a smiling, rather short, elderly man. He was waiting for my arrival. Having expressed

his apologies for not walking downstairs to greet me, as taking these steep steps would cost him great effort, he asked me to follow him into his small dwelling – arranged as a standalone unit in the house's expanded attic. He wanted to show me his place, to credit him with it – he built it on his own, and has lived there ever since his wife's death. There are two small rooms, one a workspace, equipped with an old desk, a computer, a multifunction printer (with a scanner and fax machine), and with bookcases filled with documents, photographs and books, all arranged in order. The other room is a bedroom and living room in one, cosy and timber-clad, with a small table in the middle, and numerous ornaments featured on the walls – Catholic religious symbols included. There is also a small bathroom and a kitchenette with a fridge and a gas cooker. Great order prevailed in this world indeed; each thing occupied its own, specially prepared place. All this gave me the impression of a cabin in a safe ship.

There was quite a youthful dynamism, typical of an athlete, in the way Zygmunt behaved. He moved quickly around his private space, talking vividly, showing me various objects on the walls. But the visit was not merely a guided tour: I talked about myself too, about what I do, the KARTA Centre and the project aimed at recording the biographical memory of former camp prisoners and coerced labourers, which provided the direct impulse for this visit. My Interviewee listened to me with much interest. My impression was that he had an excellent understanding of the idea for such recordings, for the recording of (a) memory; he would not inquire as to what it is for, for whom, or with whose money. I am pointing this out, because I have many a time quite clearly had to respond to such questions in similar situations.

It was not easy to switch from such a dynamic interaction to a quiet talk. The coffee he prepared for me and the tea he had made for himself enabled helped us to take our seats at a rather small table, opposite each other. My host treated me to an exquisite walnut cake which he liked very much, as he told me straight away, and he often bought himself a piece on Sundays (our meeting was on a Monday). It was only at this point that I could take out my recording device and start the actual interview, or rather make an attempt at initiating the biographical story we had agreed beforehand to unfold.

The very act of the overt switching on of the recording equipment modifies, be it for a moment, the mutual interaction (usually not for too long, as the device normally ceases to be the focus of attention as the talk/story proceeds). The meeting and the conversation gain a new context, being turned into a recording, investigation, interview, piece of documentation, etc. This moment, when the situation is redefined, commutated, needs familiarisation – particularly challenging to the Interviewee, not quite accustomed to this new role. This getting used to the interference of the microphone becomes an integral part of the interview. This moment can be neglected (but not erased!) while analysing the recording; otherwise, one can pause at it for a while, paying attention to the process of the emergence of an investigated individual, a witness. Here is a transcription of the first segment of my interview:

[PF] I would first like you to introduce yourself, sir. Please tell me your first name, surname, date and place of birth.

[ZP] Uhhh... How about the stipulation as regards the [personal] details? [laughs]

[PF] [laughs] This is not to, // not to be used in evidence.

[ZP] That's no big deal, go on use it! I am Zygmunt Podhalański. Zygmunt Podhalański, 'cause I have to say this, like, clearly enough, for sometimes someone would say this in a way that... Well, I am a man of [Nowy-]Sącz [area], though I was born in the village next to it. Because I was born at the time my mum worked there. She didn't make it back home on time and delivered me in the village, twenty kilometres from here. I arrived [here] after I was born.

The tension triggered by the new situation is discharged straight away with a smart joke, which separates the interview being recorded from the other part of the meeting, the preceding free conversation. This joke also indicates certain distant contexts, which the specific situation of our meeting could have evoked. For one thing, there is an awareness of the legal protection of personal details; for another, there may have been associations with the word 'recording', the word being present in the contemporary mass media in phrases such as 'recording from a hiding place', 'incriminating recordings', and the like. Zygmunt's laugh and his phrase, "That's a no big deal, go on use it!", show a distance toward such associations, and his considerable trust towards me, and likewise toward himself, given the interview situation. My Interviewee has thus anticipated not so much the course of our interview but, rather, his position within it: his assumption is that he will control his own story as it evolves. The course of this story is imaginable, somewhat schedulable, and so he can sign it before the blanks are filled in. His certainty was also due to the fact that, as I learned only later on, a few years before we met, Mr Podhalański had written down his reminiscences, mainly wartime ones. He did it 'just for his kids, as a private venture', and did not want to give me access to this work in its entirety. He suggested to me that he would select some fragments of it and have them rerecorded on a CD or send me them as an attachment to an email. The whole text, featuring scanned photos, documents, letters, and the like, was originally written on a computer and was saved there. This fact becomes of importance when it comes to analysing Zygmunt's oral account.

One of the first sentences uttered as part of it, uttered right after he literally introduces himself and opening the 'narrative proper', is the simple declaration: 'I am a man of [Nowy-]Sącz'. This concise and content-imbued piece of information links this Interviewee's identity, his self-definition, with the particular place, the locality and space. Apparently, he is not a Pole, a mountaineer²⁵⁸; not a soldier, veteran, camp survivor, or disabled war veteran: he is, simply, 'a man of Sącz', the town and region. Such an identification – apparently, the simplest of all, plain and

258 His surname literally means a Podhale man – Podhale being the 'Polish highlands' region (Transl. note).

neutral – calls for a distance which would allow us to see this locality as a certain homogeneous whole. His attachment to the land, to that physical fragment of the world is additionally emphasised by the history of his own birth, also made part of this autobiography. The family story is inbuilt into the autobiographical memory and is, in fact, inseparably interwoven with it.

In many accounts, their first section, being a free narrative, the whole pre-war period appears reduced to just a few sentences. Regardless, however, of the earlier talks and requests for telling the entire story of one's life, the memory only evokes a few landmarks in the pre-war biography, and forthwith departs from them as it strives to tell the story of the events of importance. So it is with Zygmunt, although the pieces of information he drops in, as if in passing, appear to be of extreme importance for the reading of his later, wartime and post-war, experiences.

In Sącz, my father worked as a manager of the Group Farming Depot warehouse, // there was such a warehouse in Jagiellońska St., in our town. Till the year '35. I attended a primary school, then a *gimnazjum* [junior high school], then, a *liceum* [grammar school]. The thing being, in '35 ... we moved, as my father eventually // retired and opened ... a shop of his own. We moved at that time to another address, and there we lived till the year '39. I passed my *matura* [high school finals] in '39. Afterwards, I pass my exam for, // to the technological university of Lvov. In the meantime, [I] work[ed] for a month – they enrolled us at the Labour Corps near Łomża, where we constructed the defences. Once I returned from there, I got to join the military, and commenced my military service on 15th August.

The main points of his own education, the reference to his father and the shop he ran – without evoking specific scenes or events, without zooming in on individuals or places, with no mention of the mother, brothers or sisters: this is only an incomplete biographical note, made up from the standpoint of his later, and subjectively more important, experiences, one that merely introduces the listened to the narrative as such, the of which plot is struck up as the war breaks out:

I was here then, we patrolled [Nowy-]Sącz. I then received an order to leave. I left, and was supposed to report to Kovel. I did report to Kovel. From Kovel, I was redirected to Sarny. Then, our 'friends' from the East came in, so I fled back. In a miraculous way I managed to get through, and, various things, like... There were very many, those ordeals.

From this moment onwards, his account becomes denser, turning into the wartime story of its narrator's experiences, his own adventures. He is the central character of these adventures, or, as he calls them, these numerous 'ordeals'. History as we know it based on historical books and textbooks is rarely evoked here (contrary to many other accounts); it is almost ousted from this story, brushed aside, becoming merely a background for the story. That this history is approached in this way does not mean that it is of no relevance; what it means, instead, is that my Interviewee approaches it as a given and obvious history, one that does not require additional

clarification. He assumes that we operate within a shared space of communication, both of us having a basic knowledge that does not require verbalising, which is transparent; all in all, it forms the minimum without which the story would not be comprehensible. There is even more to it: the narrator assumes a minimum of a common and concordant interpretation at the moment he mentions – not quite seriously – the entry of the ‘friends’ from the East. He is giving me a wink, for we do understand each other. Mr Podhalański treats me seriously – not like a school student who has to be told that World War II was kicked off by the attack on the Westerplatte peninsula on 1st September. This is not a joke: so many former camp prisoners, when recorded today, say this, melting their individual experiences into a generalised historical narrative.

These numerous adventures, ‘ordeals’, call for some common denominator, to be somehow gathered and put together, to form a relatively coherent story. Already this first fragment signals the need to have this autobiography consolidated, through interpreting the personal experiences in terms of ‘getting through in a miraculous way’. More such descriptions will occur: integrating, adding a common meaning to the various episodes.

Meanwhile, his memory evokes the first specific, distinct image included in this narration: the moment Zygmunt comes back home from the warfront, after the 1939 defeat. The return takes place in November – which is, as it appears, yet another bracket that makes the story cohesive, adding a metaphysical aspect to it.

I returned home, which was in November too. That November for me is a... it's a... // I volunteered in the meantime still, when [General] Kleeberg marched toward Kock, then I signed up there. There were a few of us. We were in Lublin province at the time, and well, a captain, like, called us and says, ‘You know what, boys, there's no point in you going with us. Off you go, go home.’ They took the uniform[s], they took the arms from us, and they sent us back home, for he [= an officer] says, ‘You'll be of more use at home than to here.’ And that's how I returned on a bike, back here, to Sącz.

Kleeberg, Kock – the words known from history textbooks. They are referred to here as the narrator intends to set his personal experience within a broader historical context, but the concreteness of one's personal experience no more fits the textbook. It does not matter to what extent this constructed citation renders the real words that were uttered then. What matters is that it renders their sense, or meaning, allowing us to interpret the experience being referred to. Amidst the grandiloquence of phrases about a heroic struggle in defence of the homeland, we encounter the trace of a real, mundane situation: since the venture ended as a failure, now the time is to save one's skin, as long as possible – give back the uniform and the arms, get on a bike and ride back home. The anonymous captain, with the order he gives to get back home, is an important element of the reminiscence: he has taken away the burden of responsibility, and enables Zygmunt to feel all right today while thinking of that distant situation.

An initial involvement in the conspiracy is the next point in this autobiography. This reminiscence also shows no trace of a romantic interpretation, of making some difficult decision: the language he uses offers no bombast whatsoever. There are, again, banal everyday realities, evoked with the use of simple words:

Well, and here in Sącz, it really didn't take long as I'd already met a mate from Kraków – he was a brother of one I just mentioned – Czerniak [surname], Staszek [first name; diminutive of Stanisław]. He was, // he studied at that time. ... Studied law then. He studied as [= to be] a lawyer. He suggested to me that I join an organisation, like, the POZ [abbr. for Polish Armed Organisation (PF's note)] 'Raclawice'. Whether I would try and set it up, together with him... I'm saying, 'Good, we're going to do it together, to work. But, what's the exact point?' And, this is how we started that work, in this... I was confirmed by oath on January 10. The group was already larger at the time. And, well, I distributed [illegal press (PF's note)], let us say it, on my way... And I sometimes went to Warsaw, and so forth.

Such un-martyrological biographical memory of participation in the underground movement during the war is characteristic not only of this particular account. Instead, it is in fact the dominant mode in which his whole biography is evoked: namely, through interactive processes. Zygmunt quotes the name of his organisation, which somehow sets and embeds this image in a historical context (although we cannot be certain whether this Interviewee was aware of it at the moment he became involved). Some reminiscences lack this element, or it clearly appears added from the resource of later-gained knowledge, rather than from the actual memory of the experiences in question.

The word 'Warsaw', used here to mark a certain general category of reoccurring incidents, Zygmunt's travels, triggers a very specific and distinct image of a certain situation:

I can remember one such ride. I was told to report at Wilcza St., with the watchword. And there I got ... the newsheets, so called at the time, that is, *Polska Żyje* ['Poland Is Alive'], and the ZWZ [Union of Armed Struggle] bulletins. Well, and I got on the train, got my ticket. And, what I always say is one thing: that personally, as for myself, I don't know how come I am alive at all. Between you and me, the fact that I live, I just don't know whom to thank [for it]. This might be a particular incident, another lucky incident, one more lucky incident. But I have had too many of these incidents.

The lively micro-story of the journey and its accompanying adventure, struck up a moment before, is suddenly suspended, since the episode is soundly related in the man's memory with its interpretation. This evokes incident and miracle, being apparently an instance of both of these. This single miracle recalled, it triggers the images of the following ones; hence, a digression starts here which runs for a few minutes and is composed of stories of earlier occurrences which have been remembered together, as though they were perceived through a single interpretative filter. Let us first follow the first story:

We went to Warsaw, that was an interesting situation. I took all those things, put them into the suitcase, underneath. There was one pistol, some cartridges. I cannot remember exactly now, I think there were two boxes of cartridges. I put my gear on the top. I put the suitcase on the... I sat down – I had my seat reserved, so I got on the train, and off we go. Somewhere, I think it must've been near Radom, two civilians entered, that inspector and a military policeman, and started checking all those seated on the train. They scanned everybody's luggage, one by one... // Ticket, identity card, *Kennkarte*. ... They checked the baggage, opened it, what's inside there, etc. And everyone [like this], one after the other. They approached me, I'm giving them the ticket and thinking, now that's the end. Initially, I thought to escape through the window somehow, but say to myself, 'It won't work, 'cause the window's closed, I cannot jump out.' I was sure that there would be nothing anymore... As he took that ticket from me, one of them says, 'Shall we go, sir'. They left me and went away. And I wasn't checked. Everybody was checked in the compartment. Then I could see them lead a few individuals from the third or the fourth one. But I arrived there. I went to Tarnów on this train. I want to get off the train at the Tarnów station, for what I needed to do was to change for a train to Nowy Sącz, and it appears that the train is covered. There're soldiers standing at the one and at the other side, and they're checking all those exiting, what they have, what they've bought, what they carried, and so on. As I wanted to disembark, I had to get off in the direction where they stood. I don't know what sort of an inspiration fell upon me... I grabbed this my suitcase and without pondering much – there was the *Bahnschutz* thing, that is, the rail guard – I went there at once. Then, nobody would halt me as I walked, for I was going to the office. I put that suitcase on the table in front of them and start explaining to them that I had had two suitcases, that someone had stolen one from me. I'm showing it to them and say that I'm just left with this one, and what is more, not *gestohlen* [German, 'stolen away from me' (PF's note)], but *verdiebt* [grammatically incorrect verbal formation based on the German noun *Dieb* = 'thief' (PF's note)], for *Dieb* means thief, so: '*Die haben mir verdiebt*'. '*Verdiebt? Was heißt verdiebt?*' I'm explaining to them, to the right, to the left [i.e. in a variety of ways]. They were playing some card game, enraged at me having interrupted them. At last, that one says a *Dolmetscher* [interpreter (PF's note)] needs to be called, this and that is what we need. And I'm looking aside through the window and can see they're already drawing down, that this ... // Because the train has already left, so they're drawing down all those people. I grabbed that suitcase, waved my hand, and fled that train [*laughs*]. And then I did not get off the train in Nowy Sącz, for I'm saying there might be the same situation, but escaped one stop before Sącz: Jamnica. And I jumped out there and went away. I walked home on foot then. And, I say, what, there's nought like luck. Of such accidents, I had so terribly many that...

Let us see the earlier fragments of this account, interpolated, as I have mentioned, as a digression to the story I am quoting. The memory, activated by the reminiscence of a single 'lucky coincidence', had instantaneously found access to many other such incidents, which it grouped within one set – under a shared

interpretation, which has made them similar to one another. The similarity does not, however, lie in the course of those events, so different as they are, but in the sense or meaning that the narrator adds to them when interpreting his biography.

For it was in 1939 too, when we were... There was an incident when during the bombardment in Chelm, I lay down against a wall, somewhere within the limits of the railway station, and a bomb which fell on the other side of the street bumped against a house and fell right next to me, not exploding [*laughs*]. What an exit I made there, how pale I was when I jumped out... // Well, I wasn't sure what had happened, then, // I'm thinking to myself, what's happening, as I'm alive. I just stood up then already, and watched two Polish planes flying, and the whole battery of our ack-ack was firing at them, so I left the place.

Then, in Kovel, as we were directed to Sarny, the train was attacked, halted, and as we returned, we were attacked on our way back, // halted by those // Ukrainian nationalists. They mortared us. I had a... // I operated a machine gun – I only had enough just to give it the [cartridge] belt. We fled there, I started to search how to get away. I reported that I'd turned up. They told me to escape, at once. I went to such, // to such Sir-and-Madam. ...Well, and once I was there, it turned out that three wearing red armbands had come there: the Militia. Obviously, 'Your ID!', and so on. I produced all that. They're saying, 'Now, you're coming with us. We shall help you go home.' But when I saw what they were like, then I'm saying, 'Good, but I've got some more luggage in the room next door. Let me then take it.' I went to that room. Luckily, they didn't follow me. I jumped through the window, sat on a bicycle I had there at the back, and I fled. I went toward, // in the direction of the Bug, and there, in Dorohusk, is a bridge. I'm coming up to that bridge and see that a mass of people is standing there. It turns out the Germans, German tanks, are already standing on the other side. And, well, now, either stay here, or there. Fortunately, I hid the uniform and everything beneath – I covered up, // I had a capote of a sort, which I had got there. I had a rifle fixed by the bike. And at the back, behind the belt, I had a revolver. And the Germans stood there, and, to everybody, one by one – the military men, move aside; those who had a gun, move aside. And I am going, like that, with my heart in my mouth. That German caught me, pawed here on the front, and pushed me forwards. I was still naive then. As I passed by and saw those who'd been shot by the firing squad under the bridge, who had had arms with them, then I, well, almost fainted, yes.

I afterwards returned via Chelm and so it went for the whole time, and I for instance went through that village, in the forest I walked through, like, a road, saw carts smashed, people killed, horses killed. But I, well, walked on quietly, for, I say, // there were no more air raids, nothing. As I only walked on a bit – a house in the village, that is, this was not a village, just some three, four houses. A woman, as she saw me... 'And you, where are you coming from?' I'm saying, I'm walking from that place. And she, 'But mister, this road is full of mines!' For everything had been blown up on the mines, the various things that I had seen then. Then, well, you've got yet another instance of luck, of sorts. To say nothing of it that, for example, that while still going that way, we were shelled by German tanks near Rzeszów. And there too,

in some miraculous way, I managed to crawl into some dugout. And what I'm saying is, and the same thing [was] there too.

The phrase 'the same thing there too' puts an end to the digression (using Schütze's analytical language, I prefer to label this passage more precisely as so-called background construction); now, my Interviewee resumes the thread of his journey from Warsaw to Nowy Sącz. This entire digression covers the images included by the narrator as part of a series of lucky incidents, uncanny cases, coincidences, miraculous occurrences. These constitute the whole story about the experience of the first weeks of the war. These are the 'ordeals', the numerous incidents Zygmunt mentions at the very beginning of his account. And, as in the beginning, the historical events form but a bleak background for his own adventures. A collective trajectory of the outset of the war forms the scenery of the story. It belongs, mostly, to the context of the conversation, to the assumed knowledge of the partners in the interaction. The collective experience of the beginning of the war – the bombings, mass evacuations and returns, fear, deaths – have disappeared from the foreground also because the narrator avoids presenting his personal lot as an individual trajectory which might be made part of those experiences: helplessness, impotence, determination by the overpowering external circumstances. Instead, he builds a story of his own resourcefulness, inventiveness, and adroitness.²⁵⁹ This resourcefulness comes as a response to the collective trajectory, and a means of avoiding the individual one.²⁶⁰ These qualities fill each of the episodes Zygmunt has evoked but not worded explicitly: these are not what an interpretation of the individual experiences is built upon. The thing is, there were 'too many' of them for them to be subject to a simple rationalisation. Metaphysics comes to the rescue, helping consolidate and add meaning to these incidents: happiness, miracle; yet, this category ultimately remains impenetrable, so a mystery, some intriguing secret, remains. And this is what this autobiography is built upon.

The experiences of the first weeks of the war, as Zygmunt evokes them, can also be read in terms of the encounter with the two occupiers of Poland. The Germans are remembered unambiguously – they have the tanks, wear uniforms, are set in their roles, not hiding their real intentions – but what the Russians intend to do is unclear and needs being recognised, deciphered, their false mask uncovered: 'when I saw what they were like...'. Both are successfully bamboozled, at this stage of the story (and, of the biography).

The period of his involvement in the conspiracy becomes dominated, in the unrestrained narration, by the above image of travelling by train. As the memory is focused on specific details, a broader background is not evoked; we will find no

259 Cf. K. Kowalewicz, 'Narracje autobiograficzne – zagrożenie – zaradność', in *Biografia a tożsamość ...*. In this context, see also: A. Rokuszewska-Pawełek, op. cit., pp. 123–145.

260 Cf. M. Czyżewski, 'Generalne kierunki opracowania, wymiary analityczne', in *Biografia a tożsamość...*, p. 46.

description of ordinary daily life under the Occupation. No assessments or commentaries accompany these narrative sequences. What we come across, instead, is another overshoot – forward, this time – to another detailed story, which the memory has juxtaposed with the others.

And this is still nothing, for I was arrested on 10th December 1942. Because still before then I escaped, but, well, returned, as my father let me know that the action had ended. I was hiding, here near Sącz, in a village. I returned, and was arrested, in December. Theoretically, I could've still fled through a gate, and even wanted to flee, but they warned me that they'd take the whole family. I then said, well, that this wouldn't make much sense. They set a dog on me, but because I am not afraid of dogs, I stroked the dog, and the dog sat beside me [*laughs*], and we walked together. And that Gestapo man who convoyed me was staring so much, that the dog which was supposed to do me in, // to jump onto me and so on, but it somehow completely, you know, // laughed it off.

Although heralded as yet another awesome lucky incident, this episode would not lead to a happy ending, in contrast to the previously reported ones (including the would-be arrest, referred to as a digression). The dog being greeted is successfully immediately tamed, but this cannot fundamentally change the situation. It simply sets a turning point in this biography: a trajectory is being entered, a series of experiences that are not to be evaded or avoided, by any means, has begun. A chance to dodge still appears – as a potential, theoretical option, but is, rather, a later commentary to events than a choice he could really have made at the time. The threat that his family could be prosecuted was treated by the Interviewee as a sufficient warning: 'this wouldn't make much sense'. The price for all these escapes and adventures now becomes too high. Interestingly, these new experiences are also reflected in the way he speaks: the narration slows down, as if more ponderous, drearier. Only the reminiscence of the tamed dog revives it and adds dynamism to it once again. The Interviewee's laugh, which can clearly be heard as he recalls this scene, emphasises even more the contrast with the surrounding scenery of the events. This contrast was probably of importance for the memory of the event, intensive as it is. Along with the very few other events in the narrative so far, such as his birth and oath, this event is marked with an exact date; this moment sets one of the limits in his biography.

And then, the interrogations started. These interrogations, I've described many of them, for it's hard to talk about them. The fact is, indeed, that I ate nothing for three days ..., as they gave me nothing to eat, so as to tenderise me. I sat, handcuffed, in a, sort of, latrine [t]here. I was there twice anyway, 'cause afterwards, as I was back too, they locked me up in those same latrines. It's just that I was not handcuffed this time, but then, I was. My hands and my feet, so. I was kept there for three days. Three days after, they took me from there to interrogate me. And, the beating, including the // the nails... the hammering under the nails. Well, whatever they only could.

Talking about the suffering one has incurred is a tough thing – not only in an interview situation. It is tougher indeed than with regard to any other feeling or sentiments, although the suffering is what so strongly sticks in one's memory, self-image, and internal self-narration. It is perhaps easier to express through a text, relating to a deferred, imagined reader, rather than a living and reacting human sitting opposite to the teller. This is why Mr Podhalański now refers me to the articles he had published in the local press. But in those recollective texts he also refers to the events and facts, rather than his own feelings or emotions. Like the sentences he has just quoted, which he would not abandon in his account, in spite of having referred to a written text. He would not go deep into the details of how he was tortured, confining himself to enumerating some examples. He has had his fill of distancing himself from those painful experiences: he is willing to leave this territory and head instead toward the events from another, post-war, phase of his biography, the scene of which was exactly the same – a circumstance he deems to be a paradox and a black joke of history. Not that the very 'longue durée' of the venue (of any such venue) is paradoxical, however:²⁶¹ what is paradoxical is that he was kept prisoner there in two very different phases of this durée/term – in both cases, for having allegedly posed a threat – as a very broad concept – to a forcefully established order. The digression made by the narrator is also a good example of how unchronologically a memory can operate, linking the experiences into sequences that are not linear, adding a shared meaning to them within an autobiography.

Even in such a dramatic situation, this man tries to find a space for the experiences that were his own, that he could influence, as he was their subject. It is as if he creates the second stratum of the story of his stay in custody and the interrogations:

So, the first day, I managed to weasel out. I started quoting the names of some people I knew from the cemetery. They wrote those names down, and eventually brought me out. ... Next I was given some coffee, a milk-based one, and some piece of bread. I ate [that], after all, just to have eaten something. But I, well, went to the cell and it turned out that in the cell next door, they had put my, // that colleague of mine with whom we had worked together. So he was there, put in the cell next door, well, and there was such a, they called it a horse, and so I called it that too. The situation was that there were those curtains by the windows. You probably know what I mean, as you've got the window, so to prevent you from getting out, there are planks there. But you could open the window, take something and throw it out there. And so we were throwing our messages out there, or by knocking doing this, you know... And I managed it, I threw it there every once in a while. And I said what I said, and he told me what he told me. For what I'm saying is that this is not going to end.

261 See M. Kula *Zegarek historyka*, Warszawa, 2001, p. 203 ff.

The following account, covering his stay at the Gestapo prison, merges the two layers of that experience into one. My Interviewee now reports on it in terms of a game played between him and the other prisoners, on the one hand, and the Gestapo men, on the other. While the final outcome is virtually prejudged, what the narrator holds important is those petty skirmishes – cheating the enemy for a while, discrediting them (be it in his own perception), bothering and troubling them:

Well, and then, interrogations lasted for two weeks. First, they bruised me for having given them the names of individuals who were dead, that, what I think at all, and so on. And then, we started blaming one another. That I know nothing, 'cause... And he didn't know anything either. And so, once you couldn't bear it any more, you would say that that one had told me that. And then I said to him, then he'd own up, that what I'd told. And I owned up on what he told. And this is how it all began to dovetail. And that was right before the holiday [Christmas]. They always did it the way that once they stopped interrogating, you would be put standing against the wall, facing the wall, and, well, waiting till they came and you were taken away, and led forth to the prison. 'Cause then, you had, to the prison, after all, to make it some 150 metres, walk down the street and so on. I stood like that and I don't know, again, what it was that tempted me. At one point, I spotted a shadow and I pulled my head back, and that SS-man banged his fist against the wall. But, with such a horrible, that... And, he shouted so... He grabbed a pistol, and came toward me. He was halted by the other one, who stood there, next to him. What is, // what is he doing that the interrogations have not finished yet? They stopped him, and he beat me around the face with the pistol butt, so I all my teeth here were knocked out. This was my only pleasure, let's be frank to each other, for Christmas.

These events are reported on in a reserved manner, with a sense of humour even. There is not a single trace of references to struggle, the Homeland, Poland; there is no pathos. It is difficult to identify any straightforward interpretation of those events. It is hidden in the form in which they are evoked by memory, in an attempt at to build with another chapter of the character's adventures with them, although these adventures now, after the pause of December 1942, take place in completely different social worlds.

Although this is an unintended aspect, the story being developed is a male story. This is not just because no females have appeared so far (apart from two images: a mother delivering a baby and a person encountered coincidentally in a bombed-out settlement): the story permanently uses the image of a tough, strong, brave and undefeatable man.²⁶² These attributes also turn out to be valid when an image of him, lying on the cell floor, beaten senseless, is evoked:

262 A. Rokuszewska-Pawełek indicates a 'collective model of the Underground soldier, with his moral obligations of courage, loyalty, keeping silence, and commitment', identifiable in the accounts provided by this group of narrators. However, the narrative under analysis would not fit the 'heroic-martyrological variant of the trajectory of arrest and imprisonment', which relates to the said collective pattern. Cf. Rokuszewska-Pawełek, *op. cit.*

I recovered, incidentally, and then the mates in the cell with me woke me up and got me fixed. You know with what? You wouldn't even suppose it – even when they stuck a piece of cigarette into my mouth and lit it, they couldn't get me fixed. But once I breathed in, I choked, so that I got over it.

Endurance and a bitter sense of humour also appear in the scene of the prison Christmas Eve, which emerges as the narrator continues. There is no room for tenderness, the sense of loss of a sacred time, longing for home. There is, instead, pain from the wounds of knocked-out teeth, caused by cabbage acid, and there are follow-up interrogations. This manliness is one of the ways in which a meaning is added to this biography.

And so, as I'm saying, we got then – the day was somehow extraordinarily good – a sauerkraut soup was [served], which I couldn't eat, because of my teeth, it was so awfully stinging, for the acid there was, so I had a Christmas like, you know... // My whole joy, that was. And still, two, // I was called in twice still, but that was ending somehow mildly, in a way, relatively. When I was taken to the prison in Tarnów.

The imprisonment in Tarnów completes the stage of Zygmunt's biography, which directly preceded the concentration camp period. His stay in the gaol, short in calendar terms, turns out to be extremely important capital once he is put in the camp. Crossing the gate of a *kacét* with such a wealth of experience deeply informs the way in which he experienced the camp's reality, which, even at the first contact, does not seem as awesome to him as to most of those who were put into it directly from a relative Occupation-time freedom.

The detention, interrogations, imprisonment in the gaol and in the camp – all these are undeniably the experiences of an individual trajectory, which are evoked in different ways by the memory of those who have gone through them. Zygmunt Podhalański's memory builds images by means of contrasts, identifying bright spots, footholds, amidst the gloomy and painful experiences, including those of the camp:

We were taken from Tarnów to Birkenau, to Brzezinka. And there, as we just arrived, it was February. Just, mind you, a period more-or-less like this one, and there was a similar temperature to what we have today. Such a, slush, as if, snowing, as if. They drove us through in there... // There's just one thing I say, I am always grateful to all those who have helped me, and I especially find that people are really good, for they didn't have to, did they. As we were passing through there, being beaten, chased, ... all these well-known things, after all, so there's no point telling. But, of, such, more interesting things... Someone there shouted, 'Never tell them you're a student!' Someone there must've known me, when he saw me. 'Quote your profession!' ... Because I had dabbled in radio before the war, 'Electrician', I told them. When they asked me what I was by profession, I became an electrician. This became true later on, in a different manner, by the way.

These 'well-known things' about which 'there's no point telling' will reappear in the narrative in a moment; they remain side-tracked for the time being, so as to fit

the finding that 'people are really good'. This comes as a very strong interpretation of a piece of advice given by someone: perhaps this advice really did save his life. It certainly helped him cope with the trauma of the camp initiation, and prevent the exact opposite thought: 'people are really bad'. One would have found it much easier to comment on his or her stay in a concentration camp by reference to the latter statement; this is particularly true for the beginning of the stay, with the collectively experienced violence, impotence, obedience, and helplessness.

We came in to take a bath, a vapour first. You had to strip naked. And we all had lice, after all, a fucking lot of them. So, we had to strip naked. [Going] to a sauna, like, there was something like a sauna there. And then they drove us away from it... and still before then, they cut our hair, they sheared it all off, completely. And then, to that sauna. From that sauna, we went on to be put under a cold shower. From that cold shower, naked, out into the open, and we waited till the morning. Half had already collapsed by then. So, there was no chance to survive.

This scene is common to almost all the camp narratives, and is described in a similar way everywhere: it appears as a collective experience, to the extent that it has been memorised through the same images, as if contact with the camp thwarted one's ability to experience the world individually. However, this collective experience soon comes to an end in Zygmunt's narrative. The pattern of narrating the consecutive stages of becoming an inmate, characteristic to the survivors, is broken in this particular account. This manifests itself in the way in which his personal experiences are reported on (the narrative 'how'), and is rooted in the experience itself (the narrative 'what'); therefore, instead of a routine description of the quarantine, as a subsequent grade of sucking the prisoners into the camp universe, there appears a completely different image. And this is the only possible option, since we are dealing here with a borderline experience whose symbolic potential is huge. As the image comes again into my Interviewee's mind, the pace at which he speaks decelerates, his voice lowers, the rhythm calms down. The narrative grows more solemn, an effect that is emphasised by the steady sound of the ticking clock. The narrator's interpretation – with regard to the recorded sound rather than a mere transcription – would not ignore those extraverbal meanings:

The quarantine was supposed to last two weeks. That quarantine took various twists and turns, 'cause when it was regular, you would exit that barrack, sit out there in the, // in the cold, and you'd go back in there. But well, more and more people were ailing. Well, myself included. I started hallucinating in the night, all of a sudden. ... That day I bore it somehow, laying low for some time later on. The following night, I had a dream that... // Well, I'm not sure if I can put it like: that was a dream. In any case, I was in a beautiful park, with flowers, trees, birds. And so I walked through that park, and at a certain moment, a whirlwind rose, the trees started breaking, and I, as I was trying to shove that away from me, I hit [myself against an object] and, it turns out, I felt something cold. I woke up, and I'm lying on a stack of corpses. For it turned out that ... I had died that night. At least, this is what they declared. I was stripped

naked. This was done in the way that those prisoners were put so as to form the heaps ... – two of them, two, two, two. I was, fortunately, on the very top. I struck and fell down the pile. But, naked. I am looking around, like, and can see that there are those clothes of ours lying against the wall, so I dressed myself a bit with what I could find there. Whether all those things were mine, I don't know. In any case, there was a number on the trousers and on the shirt, so that I managed, and the rest was not, // that was not mine. I just dressed myself, it was morning already, the *Kommandos* were going out to work, I could hear a pistol firing, I was hit with a truncheon on my back, someone grabbed me by my collar, put me in the line and together with those going out to work... They pushed them forth, and I ended up among them...

This is a complex construction of the memory – evoking not only past events but also the contents of dreams he had at the time. In fact, one cannot be certain whether it is really dreams that are being referred to, when their image is as clear as the image of those events; hence, these ‘dreams’ form an integral part of the experience. They are no less integral than the image of himself as seen through the eyes of the others; those others are, this time, other inmates, since it is they who found or even officially declared, by remarking in the camp documents, that Zygmunt Podhalański was dead. They were probably not even aware of his name, just seeing yet another, nameless corpse marked with a number. They stripped the body naked and threw it onto the heap of corpses (arranging them in twos, in each layer, which my Interviewee tries to show by making a gesture). All these three dimensions of memory – the memory of the experiences he has been through; the memory of his dreams; and, the imagined consciousness and imagined action(s) of the others – all contribute to a ‘consolidated’ meaningful image of experience. The experience is of a very special kind: it is a resurrection, but an ordinary, camp-like one, which is encountered in many an account. It would not lead to a liberation, purification, or salvation; it is, more than anything else, an awakening in hell – if we are to continue along an eschatological track. Yet, the awakening is not complete. The sequence of the subsequent images is torn, discontinuous, not allowing us to reconstruct the course or chronology of the events it is meant to evoke. But this apparent disorder says something important about the experience, which is not easily subject to narration. A state of sickness, unconsciousness or senselessness, broken/torn contact with reality, is described.

The weather was vile, there was mud... I always remember that mud, and mud, and those corpses, in that mud. ... I worked constructing the barracks the whole day. I carried some barracks, or parts of barracks. And ... [it was in] the evening, already in the dark, as we went away from there. And instead of getting back to Birkenau, we were taken to Auschwitz. There, at block seven, I remained, // I went. I can remember one thing, that for a good job we got ... a piece of some sausage, but I couldn't even touch it. I put it into the straw-bed in my place. ... I was only drinking and drinking. ... I was losing my consciousness this way and regaining it, losing – regaining. At last, I decided in the morning that I'd go to see a doctor. ... I knew I had typhus, that those ill with typhus fever wouldn't be retained, but get an injection instead, because... well,

they were all saying it there. I decided I'd go there. I joined a queue, a long one. I stood in front of that *Krankenhaus*, in front of those doctors. I'm standing there, and, at one point, someone's grabbing me from the back: 'Zygmunt, what are you doing here?', I'm saying, 'What a claptrap. I'm turning back, and there was a merchant, like, he had a shop in Sącz, in the market also. It's just that he'd been arrested earlier still. And I'm saying, what a stupid question, for, what're you doing here? I'm looking around for him, but he's not there. But, did I dream it, or what? I'm still standing there, and that happened slowly, as that queue was long. It's hard for me to say if that took a minute, or five minutes, or ten minutes. A moment later, someone grabs me by the neck and says, 'You get away from here, I'll [take] you...' It turned out that my mates, from the first transport still, among others, caught me, dragged me out somewhere edgewise, at the back, to the doctor. That doctor only told me to lift my shirt. As soon as he saw that rash, those pimples, he asked, 'Had any lice?' 'I have.' He said, 'Go away, now!' 'Influenza', he wrote on that, and then I know that it was doctor Fajkel of Kraków. And, to the hospital, quick. There I lost my consciousness, which I regained two weeks later. The thing being, I was conscious twice during that time. Once, when I remember that someone – I suppose that was doctor Klodziński, but he didn't want to own up to it, as we talked later on – he carried me on his back to an attic and there he placed me into somewhere, covered with a blanket. And I can remember that jersey, and can remember him carrying me. The other time was when I was getting my injection, and then I asked if I really must die. Those were just moments, strokes, like, of consciousness, as if.

Two weeks later, I came round. They came to see me, then I could remember nothing. ... It later turned out that they had made some injections, specially for me, some tests, etc. ... I know that these pills which they gave me were taken away by those mates of mine, the doctors, and they'd bring instead... Then on, he said to me, 'Any idea how much you've cost me? I had such a cute diamond and I had to give [it away] for the injection.' Well, but I was told that [*laughs*] by a colleague long after the war, for he says, 'You wouldn't know what you were gabbing.'

Again, the narrator's memory has conglomerated several layers into the course of events being narrated on – including what happened, what seemed to be, what the others knew and said (while in the camp and later on), and the post-war reprocessing of those experiences. This last element – the work on this fragment of camp biography, undertaken by the drama's actors, determining a shared image of events, common meanings and interpretations – is reported on with a smile, if not a laugh at times. Laughing enables the narrator to distance himself from his extreme experiences: gliding along the border of life and death; the choice of a death which would put an end to the suffering; an incidental salvaging. Thus domesticated, the experiences can be integrated with the rest of the story, which can now be constructed further.

This story moreover links the before-the-camp phase of Zygmunt's biography with the camp period. The state of 'death' he was put into after his arrival at Birkenau and then in Auschwitz is primarily a consequence of his imprisonment

and the torments he suffered during the interrogations, rather than of what he went through during his first few days as an inmate. This continuity occurs at the level of social bonds: all of a sudden, his friends, arrested a little earlier than him, come forward and give him hints; a doctor also appears (who later on becomes a known individual among the prisoners). Support of this kind would have been rather extraordinary for a new prisoner, bewildered and paralysed with the clash against the *kaceta's* reality; but my Interviewee is not completely an ordinary *Zugang* at that moment: his earlier experiences in the conspiracy and imprisonment, although they had nearly brought about his death, make it easy for him to soon break out of the extreme oppression, apparently a deadlocked situation. He manages to enter, or rather, gets drawn into, a network of informal relations already functioning in the camp – the institution's unofficial 'second life'. As it turns out, it is apparent that everybody who entered the camp had the same sentence imposed upon them by fortune: some knew their way around, 'somewhere along the edge, at the back, to the doctor'. This is the narrator's first time in a concentration camp, but he learns its rules fast, supervised by the experienced teachers and guardians, his colleagues. He is initiated straight away into the totalitarian institution's second life. This is evident in the way he narrates, avoiding generalised descriptions of what the camp looked like, how it was constructed, or how it functioned. Instead of describing the camp 'in general', reporting knowledge on it, we are straightaway introduced to the biographical details which compound the image by unveiling the less obvious dimension of the camp, its second bottom.

They put me into a job with ... the dentists. I worked with them as a, sort of, assistant, like disinfecting the tools, and stuff. And there, let's say, they brought some soup for me. And my duty was, in turn, to go do business. ... I remember, I once carried the sausage to someone, for they'd pay you something for those teeth, and again, some piece of sausage, or something. You had to carry it somewhere, but that implied a risk.

The experience of the camp trajectory soon produces a space for his own initiative, resourcefulness, adroitness, and calculation of decisions. Even (not) being included in a transport to another camp is narrated as an occurrence dependent on the narrator and constructed – along with so many elements in this autobiography – upon the exchange of sentences, a dialogue, which is being (re)constructed. Here, the dialogue is with his fellow inmates, but with himself too, to an extent:

And there I endured things and got to know I was to go to a transport. I learned I was picked for Mauthausen, as an electrician. With me, they even wanted to... They said thus: 'Don't you be stupid, don't go. Why go there, they'll fag you out, won't they. You've just been cured. We'll get your appendix operated on and you will have ... your trip postponed, and then we'll see to it somehow.' I say, 'You know what? I'd prefer to go, for if they dispatch me right now, I'll get an extra wound then.' ... And I decided that I would go, anyway. 'We'll see what's there.' And this is how ... my first two camps: Birkenau and Auschwitz ended.

The sentence “We’ll see what’s there” sounds extraordinary in this context. Although quoted as a citation from the biography, it seems rather to belong to an autobiography that regains its earlier form, becoming once more a story about the adventures of a central character who looks to future with curiosity. This is confirmed by the next sentence, which closes his stay at Birkenau/Auschwitz in a way that seems to signify the end of a chapter or episode, a little story, rather than a traumatic experience of one’s life. One story is ended: another one can now begin.

There are quite a number of these subsequent episodes. They are arranged roughly according to the chronology of the events they concern. The first tells us about the transport from one camp to the other: from Auschwitz to Mauthausen.

We travelled all the way to Austria rather comfortably, as not in those cattle cars but in regular ones. Senior SS-men, sort of, or soldiers, or gendarmes, escorted us. There was a small group of us, somewhere around twenty people. On the way, some Czechs [were] added to it. I am very grateful to them, for we had to be put up for the night in some barn, and as we lay down on that straw, it turned out that among that straw there was bread, cut into slices and inserted there. ‘Cause there, as they did the transports, it was via that very place and they’d often done it at that farmer. And there, the people put bread inside it. So we did not suffer enormous hunger there.

This is not a typical reminiscence of a trip between two concentration camps, residing in the collective memory: this is an instance of individual autobiographical memory which presents the journey as a time of ease, with the roles becoming slack – at close range, as a small group, the overseers seem to be less threatening. Again, we are offered a toehold for the formulated thesis earlier, whereby people are good all the same, for which gratefulness is owed to them. The reservation, already known to us, that the car was ‘regular’ and comfortable, rather than the cattle cars, indicates that, given the situation, the trip as a whole was something rather abnormal – versus the collective concept: it was a privilege, or luck, that calls for additional explanation.

The following scene is the entrance into the Mauthausen camp area and quarantine once again, which is now described as an exemplifying the camp routine – not quite worthy of our attention, except perhaps for the moments of deviation which form the distinguishing marks of this experience:

We arrived at Mauthausen. They, naturally, drove us through, with rifle butts and things, barking, yelling, as always. They pushed us forwards... As we saw that castle, the area was beautiful, what the castle looks like. I’m not sure if you saw those pictures from Mauthausen? There is where they drove us to. And there, after all those regular things, I received a new number, new everything, and, to the quarantine. In the quarantine, you’d stay seated on the field the whole day, but it was the summer already, so there was no problem anymore, you’d stay there seated. The thing being, our heads were getting swollen, for was the sun shining, so, for those sensitive, their heads were bloated. I haven’t learned till this day what the reason for those heads being puffed up was. And then, as you went into that room, you actually walked in twos. You had to

turn like this, and lie down like this. We lay down one next to the other so tightly that if you happened to have to go out in the night, then you stayed stood up when you went back, for you had no place where to lie down.

One such distinguishing mark is the view of the Mauthausen camp and its location at the foot of the mountains. For some inmates, this added to their humiliation, and they felt mocked. Others saw Mauthausen as a formidable fortress, an impregnable fortified castle. For the very few, Zygmunt Podhalański among them, it was a beautiful place worth seeing. And this is perhaps not just his perspective today, since he was already so seasoned when he entered that camp: it is thus possible that he could spot what most of the others could not. He was able to overcome his horror and stupefaction that, as a rule, overweighed the less experienced newcomers when confronted with that universe. Also, we find the pain and suffering caused by the exposure of bareheaded to the sunshine reported on in a rather untypical way – as a curiosity, a biological puzzle, rather than a traumatic inmate experience. Apart from the adventure story convention in which this narrative is set, the memories written down by the narrator have probably made this distance easier to gain. Not just the very final product – a piece of paper with words but, rather, the very process of recalling his own experiences and rendering them subject to narration. Once conducted, the process leads to the crystallisation of such ready-to-(re)use, distanced narrative sequences.

The following episodes are also the same, constructed around his subsequent jobs (*Kommandos*) within the camp and the traits that made the subcamps where my Interviewee stayed distinctive. These venues are not discernible as much by their physical traits as by the way they were experienced by the narrator, whereas the narrative is maintained throughout in a chronological order:

I was taken to the block and went to work in a quarry. There, in Mauthausen, to carry those stones. So many corpses fell down in there... They had three days of leave, it was said, if he killed one of them, for either he'd take a cap from him, throw and shoot him dead and said that he wanted to flee, 'cause he shot at his back at the rear. Or, he'd knock him down, then he [= the victim] would go down with that stone, for he'd taken too small a stone. I was rather strong, so in this respect it was not a problem for me. I came along but wanted by all means to quit, so I went to the doctor and told him the following, that I've heard I am to be assigned for some transport again. I approached him, saying, 'Doctor, I'd prefer, if anything, to stay here, for I'm already acquainted with my mates here.' 'No, you're going to join that transport at once.' I then learned that the transport was going to Linz. They'd basically pushed only the Poles there. That was Linz number 1. The *Kommando* of Linz. That was, in fact, // that was a rescue for me at that point. He saved my life. He was a Poznań man. I met him on occasion later on, when we were back.

It becomes apparent once again how he regains control over what he is experiencing, although this is a camp experience. Again, a space appears for individual choices, assistance provided by a biographical carer, and a lucky coincidence. Characteristic

to this narrative, a dialogue appears, along with a distance emphasised by the meeting many years afterwards, in completely different circumstances.

Why the transfer from the central camp of Mauthausen to the Linz I subcamp²⁶³ has been interpreted in terms of a rescue, we learn based on the subsequent close-up:

That was a camp in which, // in which you could survive. There was not much screaming by the *Rapportführer*, who chased us to beat and kick us, and so on, but never did any harm to anyone. He would shout for a while, and that's it. The *Lagerführer* there was busy with the construction work around his own house. He quit caring about anyone doing anything out there. We were working at the Hermann-Göring-Werke steelworks, that's what it was called. This is at present the Alpine steelworks in Linz. The labour was hard there. ... But anyway, whatever the case, when back from the work, we had meals for us prepared on the table. Some dinner to eat. Once a week, there was some extra so-called milk soup, which ... was subsidised by the steelworks. So, I say, 'Here's an opportunity to survive.' There wasn't such a big problem. Well, it was hard, for, on going there, you had to take a bag of cement with you, on your shoulder. You'd go up there some four-and-a-half kilometres, small rocks under your feet. ... You'd go out by the Danube; you had to carry a little bit of the stuff. And on your way back, you'd take a stone and with that stone you'd go back, so you wouldn't walk with your hands empty. Those SS-men who were there were passing the time. Luckily, they swapped over sometimes. ... For instance, one time they tricked me and made me lay three bags of cement and I had to carry that. I had one bag on one hand, the other bag on the other hand, and one bag athwart. And this with the warning that if I tip over, then they'll kill me. I did make my way up somehow. Those of my mates who were walking beside me supported me

263 Linz I: in November 1942, on an initiative of Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, an agreement was signed to establish a branch of the DEST company as a slag processing plant, slag being a by-product of the Linz foundries. The agreement provided for the setting up of a labour camp by the SS, which provided the prisoners, civilian workers and appropriate appliances. A *Kommando* of thirty was regularly sent from Mauthausen to Linz, from mid-December 1942, to construct the camp there. On the 11th of January 1943, one hundred Mauthausen inmates were transferred to the new subcamp. From July 1943, once the slag processing started, the camp was expanded and the number of its inmates reached a maximum of approximately 950. Beginning in early 1944, Linz I prisoners were also assigned jobs at the local arms factory and steel establishment. Given the increasing number of inmates, for whom there was not enough room within the camp, it was decided, in May 1944, that an additional subcamp be built, called Linz III. On 25th July 1944, Linz I was bombed by the Allies; 73 to 122 inmates were killed, many of whom remain unidentified. Due to the destruction caused, the camp could no longer function and was decommissioned on 3rd August 1944, its surviving 631 inmates being moved to Linz III.

to prevent me teetering. And, I made it all the way up. Because I made it, they let me take a rest for some two or three hours. But what I'm saying, in spite of all that, this, this wasn't... // that was still a...

Although constructed as an objective image of the specific place (even being referred to with its historical as well as its contemporary name), this fragment is, rather, a blend of reminiscences about the various experiences remembered. These experiences are evaluated contradictorily, which makes it difficult for the narrator to assume an unambiguous attitude toward this particular stage of his path as a camp prisoner. Mr Podhalański weighs these contradictory elements against one another, ultimately arriving at a relatively positive interpretation. The narrator, on being charged with a triple load of cement, rushed and goaded with the threat of death, which, with a different interpretation of the episode could have been described (as in many other interpretations) as acts of cruelty, torment, the way of putting prisoners to death – here becomes a 'trick', a practical joke. The moment of relaxation offered after that 'trick', the better food offered to foundry workers²⁶⁴, the *Lagerführer* being focused more on the construction of his own house rather than on policing the camp, the *Rapportführer* who screams but does so mostly for the sake of appearance – all this should be considered as more important in the interpretation of his time at Linz I. The bombings he experienced there are also important: in the prisoners' accounts, they characteristically tend to be evoked as moments of fear, chaos, reinforced threat, but also, as a change in the camp routine, relaxation from work, satisfaction with the destruction of the Germans' military capacity, a hope for their defeat and for an end of the war:

But another thing commenced. The year '44 was nearing. The bombings started. We always escaped to a sort of shed that was there at our place of labour. A barrack was there, and we stayed sitting there. We were satisfied, as they were bombing somewhere out there, at the factory. They threw bombs down, sometimes it was just the planes flying by. And we had a break from work and could get some rest then.

One of these bombings has been remembered and reported in a particularly detailed manner: this is one of the most incisive experiences. Not just camp-related experiences but biographical ones, in general; one of those most haunting and memorable of all.

And, well, that was, I should think, July 25, but I find it hard to tell the date exactly at the moment. In any case, that was in the summer. In the morning, at the assembly we did get up when ... a plane came flying by, probably an American one. The fighter was nose-diving above us, like this, it flew past, as we were standing, and flew further

264 Employment at a steelworks, arms factory or workshop, supervised by civilian staff, indeed provided an opportunity for better food. The policy was to 'care' more for the prisoners working at such plants, so as to reduce the staff turnover while increasing the efficiency of their labour.

up. We fanned out but returned back into that... Well, and we went to work. The alert [was on,] on that day. And instead of going to that shed, where we always stood there, we returned. They told us to withdraw into the camp. So, on the double, we ran that four-and-a-half kilometres to the camp, so as to, // for there, in the camp, we had such, as if, shelters ... erected. They were dug up pits – we did it covered with beams, with heaps of gravel on top. And so, against the splinters that were flying, it was very comfortable. Each time the alert was on, ... you would stay there. And I always stood by the exit, as I was always afraid that it would fall. For it is all beautiful and nice when there's splinters flying, but should a bomb hit in here, then I say, 'This is going to break down and everyone'll get buried beneath.' Therefore I always stood so I could be near the exit.

And now... a rustle, bombs are dropping. You can hear the planes from afar. And, that's such a heinous boom. Well, it's been stated that two thousand planes were there at that time. I'm not going to exaggerate, but they flew toward Linz and laid a carpet over it... So, up from the mountains, heavy air-defence artillery stood there, then we had light artillery, which was on the Danube and around the steelworks. Then there was our camp. Then there was the steelworks and the open-hearth furnaces. And, bombs were thrown out of that mountain. There were bombs going one beside the other, till it reached our camp. In our camp, they flew by. One, // one [bomb] site got merged with another. Naturally, all those that were... // all these who were there in those... one bang of the bomb, the other one, and all that got broken down in this way, and covered those people up. In our place, it hit from one and from the other side, and it caved in at the centre. The thing is, when the bombing started, then I moved away from that exit, as it was right beside the barrack and the planes were being blown in that direction. So I kept away ... and, like, kneeled down sideways. Suddenly, I feel that there's something coming down on me, so... // but not earth, but people. I pushed myself away and tried to jump out. I go out, and see that there's nobody around. A moment later, a few people crawled out, two more. It turned out that both were hurt. And we escaped. Not looking at the time anymore, as the wires knocked about... everything, completely. There are no barracks... there was nothing. All was ... cut down. Only some were fleeing, who had survived in the other barracks out there. There was a rather small group of us anyway, just above a hundred. And we started escaping toward the Danube. We ran through there, escaping from that... for, those bombs, splinters. You would lie down inside some pit, and thus we waited for some time, and we say after that, 'What should we do? Escape? Where to?' Everything's knocked about. We started getting back again and pulling out those who still remained alive somewhere out there, under the debris....

Nothing, literally, happened to me. Could've, could've been pretty bruised at least. There were, in that, 146 people got killed, in that, our... .. They were on [i.e. members of] the *Straßenbau Kommando*, there was such a *Kommando* for building the roads. And they observed all that from above, looked what it was going on like. And we, at the place, down there. We pulled out those people who are... well... the hands, the legs separately. The SS-men who were in such booths – they'd always go into such concrete booths – yes, those survived. Why? Because the bunkers got overturned, but,

shielded with concrete, they endured somehow. They got out of there. A committee arrived from Mauthausen, screaming started. First of all, our *Rapportführer* got a good walloping, as he had let, // admitted that we all escaped from the camp. He says – for I could hear them, I knew German – that he believed that all those who were alive would return. And indeed, all of them did. So, it was concluded there. But the camp was finished. There was nothing to come back to. Everything, whatever was there, this was all completely destroyed.

The survival of a concentration camp and the survival of a bombardment are each a borderline experience.²⁶⁵ Both overlap in this particular account. The experience of the bombing appears more condensed, short-lived, and quick. This implies a dense narration, but the speed and uncanny nature of the events recorded at this point makes the narrative chaotic, fragmentary, and piecemeal. The world which is described is subject to destruction and transformation, and becomes atomised. Not only the material world, but also the social universe of the camp. The established camp positions, hierarchies and roles are called into question – to an extent, since the SS-men can hide in more solid shelters. Falling by force of gravity, the bombs reach, on an equal basis, the ordinary inmates, prominent persons, *kapos*, the camp crew, civilian employees in the factories, etc. The camp space is annihilated. Those who scampered off or hid, stampeded, are now returning. The camp, their curse, appears under the suddenly-changed circumstances to be the only possible refuge; the only assured landmark, of those then accessible. The intuition of the SS-man who had let the inmates scatter turns out to be apposite: everybody has come back! But what they are back to is, rather, an idea of the camp; the camp as an interactive space, a social universe, rather than the barracks and the factory encircled with a barbed wire. Of these, cinders remained: this was all completely destroyed. As for the bombardment experience that Zygmunt evokes, there is something of a spectacle to it: he is an actor and a spectator, simultaneously. He is distanced enough to take note of the presence of those viewers who coincidentally had a completely different vantage point, and thus whose perception of the entire spectacle was different.

With all its uniqueness, the experience under consideration has also been made an integral part of this autobiography. Nonetheless, contrary to many other parts of this narrative, no comment is uttered that would interpret getting out of trouble in terms of a lucky or miraculous incident. Still, there remains another trace, or

265 In his analysis of bombardments of urban areas as a borderline experience, Jacek Leociak points to three basic characteristics: “First of all, the fast pace and total nature of destruction, and the ensuing all-embracing chaos and havoc; second, the moment of a (horrific) metamorphosis; and, thirdly, the critical characteristic: ambivalence, a clash of ‘horror and beauty’, the experience of a *mysterium tremendum*.” See J. Leociak, ‘Bombardowanie miast jako doświadczenie graniczne’, in S. Buryła, P. Rodak (eds.), *Wojna. Doświadczenie i zapis – nowe źródła, problemy, metody badawcze*, Kraków 2007.

interpretative hint: the astonishment with which the Interviewee emphatically states that he has not been harmed or hurt. While listening attentively to his voice, recorded on a CD, we can be completely certain that this is yet another miraculous case – of which there were so many then.

The physical destruction of the camp implies the transferral of its inmates to another one. This subsequent camp, now the fifth in my Interviewee's prisoner career, is called Linz III.²⁶⁶ Again, we receive no generalised description of the place – instead, there is a rushed juxtaposition with the earlier experiences: “Linz III was when we got into; it was very much like Birkenau: dead corpses and stuff, and so forth. Same things again”. But the narrative will not follow this track: on the contrary, from this point onwards, it distances itself from those images, focusing instead on the character's new ‘adventures’. Before this is the case, though, an important introductory remark is made: my Interviewee now reflects upon his camp adaptation at that moment:

You had it all mastered then already, up to the point that you knew what to do, where to do it, and how. For, once you had got your practice, in terms of you can do this, you can't do that, never barge in there, 'cause there's no point...

As it thus turns out, it is not just luck, but what you have ‘practised’ and ‘mastered’ in terms of camp also belong to the later interpretation of survival. Still, mistakes or unwise moves happened; in such situations, someone with a still-greater experience appeared to help find an emergency solution, before oppression followed:

266 Linz III: 22nd May 1944 saw a thirty-member *Kommando* of inmates ordered to work at the existing ‘Camp 54’: a Linz III subcamp was to be constructed in its place. As a result of the Allied air-raid on 25th July 1944, a few dozen of the camp prisoners may have been killed. At the same time, the Linz I camp was destroyed and it was decided that all the inmates who had survived the bombardment be removed to Linz III. The maximum number of the camp's inmates exceeded 5,600, Poles being the most numerous among them. The conditions in this hastily-built camp were much worse than in Linz I; this, given an enormous overpopulation, caused an even higher mortality rate among the inmates. Linz III inmates were mostly assigned labour at the ‘Hermann-Göring-Werke’ factory, which produced crankshafts and tank caterpillars. They also worked at slag processing, in metal establishments, in the construction of a railroad and bridges. They were also assigned with removing the effects of bombings and building air-raid shelters. Some labour *Kommandos* were supervised by civilian workers. The camp was overseen by 370 SSmen, while Karl Schöpferle was the commandant. From autumn 1944 onwards, the local SS crew were partly replaced by the ‘old’ Wehrmacht soldiers and, in the camp's last days, by Volkssturm members as well. For the inmates, these changes meant an alleviation of the camp regime. Still, the inmate provisioning was incessantly deteriorating, till it suffered a complete collapse in the last weeks before the liberation. This caused a rapid growth in the number of the sick and deaths from starvation.

And I stopped working at breaking the stones; instead they took me as an electrician to work on the construction of a high-voltage line, by the Danube. Just figure it out, I was younger than you, I don't know how old you are, and I had to be building a high-voltage line. That is, mantle the climbing irons and assemble everything high up there. I mantled the climbers and tripped up at once, as I was making only my first steps. Fortunately, we had a Spaniard, like, as the *Vorarbeiter*. When he saw this, he approached me, '*Bist du Elektriker?*'; '*Nein, ich bin Student.*' He grabbed me, drew me in there... and gave me some engines to clean. 'Don't you show up in here.' Well, what could I do then... [*laughs*] Everything depends upon the people, always. That was where I started working.

This fragment also shows to us an interactive nature of the testimony or, in socio-logical terms, interview situation. The listener – that is, me – is pulled into an unconstrained narrative, and becomes part of the story. The narrator reminds me that it is not the old man sitting opposite to me who is the actual protagonist of this account: the central figure is the young man aged twenty-plus, the age he was then, who had no idea of the work of an electrician, just like me today. This guiding indeed made it easier for me to grasp what sort of a task, undeliverable by him, my Interviewee was faced with.

And this was not the only 'screw up' by the central character/narrator.

There was a moment when I, then already an electrician, miscoupled something and the pump, instead of drawing in that direction, landed in the centre and flooded [the area]. But I was saved by those real electricians. As he grabbed me by the collar, I didn't know where I would finally be put, but I managed to get out of that.

I also managed to exit at the moment there was a bombing and I leaped out too early to hide, and someone suddenly started shooting at me, but I crawled in between, sort of, two walls. And then everybody forgot that I had hidden there, in that hole. But, I say, those were moments, sometimes, very merry. After all, once you've been through these times, had your mates there... There was a moment when I, when working – for I worked there later on, building, sort of, concrete airbricks – and there, you laid down those cement bags together. I made myself a hole under these bags. You could enter there, and a rest a little bit, at times. No one went there. No one squealed on me, that I, let's say, had goldbricked in there.

There was a moment when the following was said, namely who can make any flowerpots for that *Lagerführer* who was building that house. I came forward, I had always had this tendency; ... a vase, why not do it? I can do it, can't I? As I made it, then I was on the open sea. I went to the carpenter, I ordered the pattern defined for me. I drew the pattern myself, for there is no problem. I returned the flowerpots, like that. If he liked it, then he says there are the shapes he would like to have. I said that I'd make such shapes. And I got down [to it]. I sculpted the leprechauns for him, like hell. [*laughs*] And there always was some little bit, half a loaf of bread, or there always was something as an extra.

One image triggers the other in the memory, and so on and so forth – all of them belonging to an unofficial camp narrative, building up a private story of that experience, with shrewdness, astuteness, bravery, and a risk-taking attitude as its central traits. Instead of a dominant and collectivising totalitarian institution, the adventures of the central character remain in the foreground of this narrative. One of these adventures was the provision of unique and exclusive services to the members of the camp's SS crew: flowerpots, leprechauns – adding to the improvement of this prisoner's situation. Along with a number of other camp narratives, this particular one acquaints us with yet another dimension of the camp interactions: the informal patron-client relations between the supervisors and individual inmates. The effect of such relations was obviously broader, as such a privileged prisoner could improve the situation of his less clever companions. Also, he had more to offer on the camp's 'commodity/service exchange', thereby reinforcing this informal situation. Let us also take a look at the leprechauns and vases, which were added to the décor in the houses or villas of the SS-men or their families. These were no warfare or warfront trophies, although their psychological status – so to put it – could have been similar. For us, it seems essential that those objects were not purely practical, portable in the pocket, or easy to convert into cash, so that the gain could be enjoyed without recollecting its embarrassing source. These were ornaments, things of artistic value for those who commissioned them, designed, matter-of-factly, in order to be displayed and enjoyed in a house or garden, rather than being kept in a cellar or attic. It may thus be supposed that the user could show such a leprechaun or flowerpot off before his (or her) guests, SS colleagues – if the object ordered for was meant as an accessory in the official villa that stood not far from the camp, or to the family's friends – if it was destined for somewhere else, possibly the family home somewhere far away in the Reich, in Germany, or Austria. If we see the prisoners' arts-and-crafts find their way to their salons, elevated, apparently the system of unofficial, informal relations – including between the high-ranking functionaries of the totalitarian camp institution and the ordinary prisoners – was an integral part of that world. Leprechauns and vases made by the prisoners of the *kacets* where SS-men did their service apparently did not trigger much astonishment, and certainly did not cause condemnation or disapproval of their owners, be it from their family members or acquaintances, or, even less so, by their fellow workers. After all, many of them had their own service providers, craftsmen or artists, among the inmates. Some of these functions – gardeners, grooms, hairdressers – belonged in any case to the official order of the camp (which is not to say that specific commissions were included in this official framework).

The approach offered to us by this fragment of the narrative shows a more general phenomenon: the entire differentiation between official and unofficial, formal and informal relations and systems, which forms part of our (sociological) interpretation of that universe, but not its obvious element, appears to be much more complex than when seen from afar. The social relations, which – to use Goffman's concept – we may call the second life of a totalitarian institution, penetrate it

thoroughly, across the division into (the) perpetrators and (the) victims. These relations involve both parties, manifesting themselves not only in the forms of religious or cultural life of the inmates, or in ways to 'arrange for' extra food.

Still, the services referred to in the above-quoted fragment are (normally, though not always) additional activities. Zygmunt's basic duty is always his regular work with the *Kommando*, the working group. One such group in Linz was the *Kommando* that cleared the debris caused by the Allied bombings – those sparse effects that proved removable.

Later there was a situation that, once they bombed Linz, ... they took us to clear the debris. I realised then how the Austrians treated us. We entered the town, went down to the cellar and there, in that cellar, // well, they had jam preserves, and, among other things, I found a small box in which there was jewellery. ... My buddy says, 'Take it, hide it, hide it.' 'No way!', I say. I went upstairs and there was one SS-man standing there, and I say, 'Hide it, 'cause this is going to be... Perhaps this'll be...' And the Austrians who were standing saw that. And I heard them say, 'Those are no thieves, are they.' Based on that, they, simply... // they believed those were the people ... whom they ... had brought along as thieves and so on. They confirmed this to me later on again ... but that was later already, // some young Hitlerjugend boys came up to us. We talked to them, they.... They were shocked by the conversations with us, that... // they started talking completely normally.

The recollection of the work removing debris from the town gives us no insight into the course this work took, the appearance of the destroyed town of Linz, and the scale of the destruction. Let us leave these questions aside, though, and follow the Interviewee's focus – the discovery, or, in fact, the several discoveries he refers to. A treasure found in the cellar of a bombed house, amid the jam jars, a box with jewellery, is just one among these, the most literal manifestation. It is only a curiosity, out of which there came a real discovery, which was a cognitive shock for the coincidental bystanders – the locals of Linz watching the work done by the prisoners driven to that place from the nearby camp in order to remove the debris in the town after the air raids. The Linz III camp was located very close to the town's limits, in kilometre terms. Yet, if estimated in terms of human distances, it would appear enormous. For the ordinary Austrians (and Germans) inhabiting their cities, towns and villages, the universe behind the barbed wire was extremely distant and they would prefer keeping themselves at a distance to it. They often read in the press or heard on the radio – many of them perhaps even hearing it at rallies and in the speeches delivered at such assemblies – how dangerous the inmates were, and how menacing to the social order. Being in a camp and doing hard work were meant to be the best ways to improve the characters of all such minacious criminals, to rescue them and offer an efficient solution for the righteous and pure citizens of the Reich, who happened to remain where they normally resided. This strong 'sanitary' propaganda proved efficient for quite a long time: there were no crevices which would help undermine it in any way – up until the moment when those imagined prisoners, modelled in the propaganda, clashed

against the real ones who worked in the bombed city amidst its dwellers and in front of their eyes. The clash must have been impetuous, if it triggered so strong a cognitive dissonance in the latter. My Interviewee was observant enough to see himself through the eyes of the onlookers; based on the sight he caught, he found that 'they believed those were the people ... whom they ... had brought along as thieves and soon'.

This recollection is powerful and the memory follows it, establishing – once again – its own sequence of events and evoking another cognitive shock – of the other Austrians or Germans. This occurred in a different moment, in the stated 'afterwards', which confirmed these careful observations of social interactions made while clearing Linz of debris.

The meeting with the Hitlerjugend boys he recalls could have been even more shocking an experience, for both parties. Hitlerjugend youth underwent powerful, and methodical, indoctrination – more powerful than the average dweller of the Reich. However, the conversation they coincidentally had with the prisoners was probably more involving than the role of bystanders played by the inhabitants of Linz.

There is one more image of a German who is converted, or 'under conversion', but nonetheless remains within his role. My Interviewee has preserved him in his memory, right alongside the two preceding cases, as the last fragment of a three-section sequence, consolidated with a common meaning:

And then on, there were, there were such *Volksdeutschs* who came from somewhere in Romania. I can recall such an accident too. [*laughs*] The Americans were throwing about those leaflets in which they coaxed the Austrians into surrendering. They even said where they were already, where they were moving forward. And so, I could see... // I had, like, an SS-man there, who, // some poor thing from somewhere, // he was a Romanian. And I was getting cigarettes already at that time, for you could receive parcels and the families sent [them] along, so in that parcel I'd always have some zwiebacks, I'd have marmalade and a packet of the shags [i.e. shag tobacco]. ... Well, and I received those shags. And that one came over to me: '*Hast du Zigarette?*' Then I took away, and gave him that cigarette. And it was him standing sentry, ... when those ones threw down... those planes flew by and those leaflets were dropped down. And I'm looking, one of them fell right before the borderline, // behind his... in the shrubs over there. And I'm thinking, shit, how can I get to that, to read it. And I went on, and reported to him that I'm offering to carry the boilers myself. He says, 'OK then, go.' I went up there, I put a stick into my pocket. I came back. Passing by him, to report that I was back, he lent toward me: 'When you've read it, give it to me.' [*laughs*] // There are things that, in the worst situations...

This episode is yet another adventure of this character/narrator, who represents himself as a shrewd and daring prisoner who knows how to bamboozle a silly SS-man of whom he speaks with indulgence. But once again, as was the case with a few of the preceding passages, let us pay attention not to the form of this story (which remains constant, and is characteristic to the entire first section of

this narrative) but rather, to its content. This content, once again, sheds light on the social relations within the camp universe. This is done, naturally, indirectly, through the ideas of the relations (some) of their participants have developed. There is a cigarette, and an American leaflet dropped down shortly before the camp was liberated, when the course of events was a foregone conclusion, and the climate inside the camp much less restrained. These objects appear to link the prisoner with the SS-man watching him. The way Zygmunt quotes the SS-man, the pitch of his voice, the whisper with which he imitates his real request for being allowed to read the leaflet, make one absolutely certain that both men were searching for news that the war had ended – although it might seem that only the prisoner has kept his role here. Also, the cigarettes requested from the prisoners (rather than pilfered from their parcels, as before) testify to the strongly changing roles. Now, it cannot be said for certain that they were never completely determined, whilst always created (and not merely role-played) by the specific living individuals; on both sides, to be sure.

The close-up on the ‘poor thing from Romania’, an SS-man asking the prisoner if he has a spare cigarette for him, is interpolated with a digression on cigarettes. Cigarettes and smoking are permanent motifs in the narratives of concentration camp survivors, including in their published memories. This thread appears, as a rule, in a different context than here, though: examples are quoted of inmates driven to death of hunger because of smoking, as they gave up their measly portions of bread for a piece of cigarette. Another frequent motif is treating them as the camp currency, with food being bought for the cigarettes received in parcels. This latter motif appears in Mr Podhalański’s account too, but the whole image is more complex. It does not refer to the camp itself but the memory combines it with an earlier series of interrogations and resuscitation with the use of a cigarette:

My parents knew I didn’t smoke but I learned how to smoke when in prison, for then I had to. ... I would have to have a flashback to how I was resuscitated at that time. As I was led out to be interrogated, they then said, ‘That was a cigarette you got from us!’ And that cigarette was a butt thrown-away, with some scraped off knots added to it, and this all wrapped in a piece of paper. And that was a cigarette. And I got beaten so many times, then I purposefully threw myself onto the ashtrays. As I was falling, then onto that ashtray, so to catch a few. That taught me, ‘cause afterwards I went and smoked in there. This is how I began to smoke. As I wrote in one letter, for that was not allowed – you had to write using a sort of cipher, that ‘Stasiu [dimin. of Stanisław] urged me to do so’ – my second name is Stanisław – that he was very happy as he had got a packet of cigarettes. And, well, I got some cigarettes, but, some sort of, Egyptian or something. They instantly took it away from me, so in the next letter I wrote it the way that he said he had got the shags. Those shags could be split into four and still you could feel it even after.

This story offers us, also, a close up on two key camp institutions whose role was often crucial for the inmate’s rescue; what I mean is parcels and letters. This close up is of value, as it provides a concrete narrative instance. The narrator evokes

two letters with a ciphered message for his family and two parcels containing cigarettes, among other things, which were sent by his relatives after they had properly deciphered the contents of these messages.

My Interviewee made use of the ‘shags’ as a currency in the camp ‘commodity exchange’ or in his contacts with the SS-man, and smoked them from time to time, although he had been abstained from tobacco before his arrest. This reminiscence has a positive undertone, some warm timbre to it, better audible in the sound recording than legible in the transcription. In this way, the reminiscence makes somewhat ambiguous the otherwise frequently duplicated and preserved image, whereby the tobacco addiction infallibly led camp inmates to self-annihilation.²⁶⁷

The experience of the bombings stands at the centre of my Interviewee’s camp recollections. His memory evokes the subsequent related situations – no longer with air raids, destruction, and chaos at their centre, but rather camp anecdotes built on their remnants, which belong, on an equal basis, to the individual as well as collective memory of the former inmates of the subcamp concerned. The narrator classes these as ‘things that, in the worst situations...’, never offering us a completed interpretation:

The bomb fell down, literally, ...away from where we were... // the barbed wire which was there, such a, double – away of that, who should know, from us, from the building, from this our barrack, who knows, twenty metres, perhaps. Well, but it didn’t explode, so they took that bomb and placed it before our barrack where we were, with the inscription that this is a gift from our friends from America. And that bomb was standing there and our men, // whoever was walking by that place... They carried it away three, four days afterwards, for they saw that it did not impress those who were walking past. As they carried it, it exploded. And killed all those Germans who carried it [*laughs*], those sappers there. And if it were, // had exploded there where we were... After all, there stood a few thousand people, near them. If it had exploded there, there would’ve been a massacre, wouldn’t there. It transpired that it did explode, but exactly at the moment they carried it. We learned [about it] later on.

267 This reminiscence of smoking in the camp is not as unique as it may seem. A team of Krakow-based psychiatrists, students of Professor Antoni Kepiński, researched into this particular aspect of the camp universe. Based upon a total of 114 replies given to a ‘questionnaire-formatted appeal’, sent in the mid-1970s to 613 former Auschwitz/Birkenau prisoners, of both sexes, the scholars divided the cohort of respondents into six groups, by their attitude to smoking: (i) I never smoked, and it never posed a problem for me; (ii) I only smoked at the camp; (iii) I learned to smoke as an inmate and have been a smoker ever since; (iv) I was a smoker before, during and after my stay at the camp; (v) I completely quit smoking while in the camp; (vi) I quit smoking when in the camp, but resumed the addiction afterwards. See: Z. Jagoda, S. Kłodziński, J. Masłowski, ‘Używki w obozie oświęcimskim’, *Przegląd Lekarski*, 1975, no. 1.

The same thing happened when they took revenge against us, as the Poles bombed Linz. We didn't even know. There was an alert on. At some point, planes flew past – the alert was recalled. The people from Linz went into, sort of, grooves in the mountains. We also walked into those afterwards, to those grooves. And, on the way back there, once the alert was over, well, then go back... At that moment, they turned back and bombed the city. A whole lot of people were killed. One of the planes was knocked out, and it turns out it was a Polish plane. The Germans rebounded on us, that our planes, that these were Poles, that how could they, [attack and kill] the civilians! Well... but what can you do. This is what the life was then. And that's the reason I'm saying it. These things are not to a story be told, you'd have to have been through it. I always explain to those I talk to that to tell is one thing, for it's an image one is watching, like you would watch – let's say, for instance – *The Battle of Grunwald*²⁶⁸, seeing the image; whereas, when you're inside of it, then this looks completely different. You feel completely different [about it].

Once again, we encounter some unbelievable incidents, or miracles – or both, combined: miraculous incidents. A 'smart' bomb that knows when to explode to kill the Germans but save the prisoners is something of a poetics of irony and the grotesque; the association it brings to one's mind is one of Andrzej Munk's film *Zeżowate szczęście* (*Bad Luck*, 1960), rather than the 'typical' testimony of a camp survivor (if any such thing exists). The second scene is an anecdote of a different category; combining it with the first is completely fair for the narrator. His memory has assigned similar meanings to both incidents – and they are both interpreted as camp propaganda, building on the bombings. The fact that the misfired bomb is defined as 'American', while the fighter pilot is described as 'Polish' is of essence for the camp interactions at that specific moment and, in any case, for how the crew behaved. Perhaps the inmates had their own definitions and interpretations of these, which, even though, unlike the SS-men, they could not impose them, they still had a bearing on their situation, offering many of them hope for imminent liberation.

Added to this is a meta-sense or a meta-meaning, and a meta-interpretation that consolidates both experiences, one that constantly returns in Zygmunt Podhalański's story. At this moment, it is expressed directly, in a suggestive comparison of memory and narrative in the image of those occurrences. However meticulous, exact, accurate, true – like Jan Matejko's paintings – an image remains flat and lifeless, merely pretending to be as deep and multidimensional as the reality. My Interviewee has for a little while stepped out of the current narrative of incidents/occurrences and pauses at his own afterthought in order to clearly stress the difference between what constituted the there-and-then experience and the subsequent memory and narrative about it: the impassable border between biography and autobiography. This 'turning toward himself' seems to me even

268 The famous large-format painting by the Polish artist Jan Matejko, 1878.

more noteworthy in that it far exceeds the typical (and no less important) conclusion that ‘these things are not a story to be told’.

Such a reflection breaks the reminiscence-based thread of the narrative being spun only for a while. Its main current is resumed again very soon. At this point, the memory evokes the labour at a mill grinding the stones that were excavated in the nearby quarry (the so-called *Steinbrecher*). Such facilities were present in the Mauthausen subcamps, where stones were not only excavated but also machined, cut and polished for use in construction.

There was not much you could do about that engineer. And, the moment came... What was that *Steinbrecher* all about? It was as like a coffee grinder, but a two-storey one, tall, made of planks. And that shaft was supposed to be revolving, like in a grinder. And you were to throw the stones in there. ... It was all already installed on the bottom level, you now had to let that cog in. ... I don't know what to call it, // well, but what you had to do was to put it inside there, and it was meant to be spinning. And it entered to that engineer's mind that we were to manually drag that up, on, like, *Flaschenzugs*. Twelve such were supposed to be put up there. Everybody was to be turning it, lifting it up, and letting it down inside.

This description of the operation of this device, which is compared to a coffee grinder, does not follow from Zygmunt's need to share with me the technological intricacies or details of the work he performed. This is just a point of departure for evoking a subsequent adventure survived, as usual, by the protagonist through miracle, luck, and/or chance. This image is vivid and worth quoting at length, although its colours appear somewhat less sharp in the transcribed version:

And I'm saying again, I had a real lot of luck. This might be called a miracle, or whatever it was, and so on. It turned out that in that *Kommando*, there was one such who, once he saw a Pole – he could speak Polish – so he asks me where I'm from. I tell him that I'm from Nowy Sącz. ‘And what's your name?’ ‘Podhalański.’ ‘Then, I definitely know your father.’ For he frequented... I played at the Imperial [restaurant] there, I was a musician. I was in his good graces, as it were, or whatever. And as I saw what that was, then I approached him and say to him as follows, that this is quite a great risk, what he's doing, ‘cause if a single hook comes off, then it'll rip off the subsequent ones, as they won't bear it. Suffice it for something to happen to somebody, someone hits, and if one side falters, then it'll smash everything at that very moment. He said to me, ‘Come back, that's none of your business.’ But I say to myself, ‘Shit, as to making them aware, that's what I did.’ I went to the smiths who were there, and say to them, ‘Listen, that ought to be done in a way so as to get broken.’ And they [said], ‘What's the problem?’ [*laughs*] And it turned out that I only managed to shout that they were coming off, as one hook came off. And once one hook got came off, then all of them were done. They somehow banged on that hook... I don't know how they did it, as the hook was broken, how they put it on. Obviously, the Gestapo instantly came over: ‘Act of sabotage!’ That engineer, readily: ‘An act of sabotage! They did it on purpose!’ They put us all into a car. And that one came up, // that one of mine, and he says

it like: This is not true, this was not an act of sabotage. 'And even if it was, then it was not because of them, since this one here', now he pointed at me, turned up to meet me and said that this was, // there's an imminent danger, that this might come off. And once it comes off, then it would cause, like... // As he said it to me, that's exactly what happened. I wanted to leave the engineer uninterrupted. But, once the engineer said so, then, what could I have said? [*laughs, ironically*] And three days he survived, as he was taken on to, // to Mauthausen. And in Mauthausen, they well knew what a rogue he was, and so they clubbed him to death within just a day. So, he had a quick finish...

This strong, manly narration about an act of sabotage featuring the central figure/narrator as the lead is very reminiscent of the stories of the activities he had participated in with the underground movement, before his arrest. The conclusion is more powerful, though, as the rules of the world in which this act is set are severer. There is no room for scruples when the situation calls for resolute action, for a good cause, after all: eliminate a civil engineer, one of the camp tyrants. No hesitation, and no doubt indeed. This action is completely within the limits of the camp morality. Or even more than that: it may be a feather in one's cap, an instance of bravery, virtue, struggle with the enemy under the specific circumstances. This is perhaps why he remains the central figure of this story – although the tragedy's final act takes place beyond the narrator's scope of experience (some other people inflicted death, 'clubbed him to death within just one day'). Based on the background construction, which is meant to explain the main thread (which is done quite partially, to be frank), we can learn of a fragment of Zygmunt's pre-camp biography which has never come forward before at all: his job as a musician at the 'Imperial' restaurant in Sącz. This motif will be resumed as our conversation continues.

Meanwhile, the unrestrained narrative proceeds: there is a follow-up to this apparently concluded story. The mask of technological competency, qualifications as an engineer, and presence of mind used in the camp game encounter a very serious response. Hence, the need to play the role up, although it has unexpectedly become tougher and tougher, causing the protagonist a fair bit of trouble:

But there was a different misfortune. Because it turned out that there was a civilian, Polier. The one who was to rebuild it. He came over to me and says, '*Du bist kein Elektriker. Du bist ein Bauingenieur.*' [You are not an electrician. You are a construction engineer. (PF's note)] Goddamn it all! [*laughs*] And I became // and I became such a *Vorarbeiter* who was to supervise that building site. That cost me, what? My health, 'cause, simply, at that time, in the year '44, in the winter, I had to sit there, upstairs, watching whether an SS-man or whoever was coming. And they were sitting and warmed themselves at the [bon]fire down there. They say, 'You are the youngest, so you can mind it. And we'll be busy doing these things.' And so we were waiting. But everything would have been nice and beautiful were it not for the fact that what I said... Because I had my plans... for I had already done something previously, that was relatively simple, that this needs being done, that cleaned, that, hanged, there... So, that labour was proceeding. It couldn't go on too long, 'cause I'd have got in their

bad books, wouldn't I. The following day, we were to set about dragging in the... The problem sometimes had to be solved. How to drag it in? And, second: What to do next? But I didn't have the slightest inkling at that moment of what was to be done in a contingency. And so I kneeled down before this, and said, 'Well, end of story: I had, in fact, prepared a... I had such a black costume made, for I took into account that if I'm ever to flee... Because our territory was already under threat at that moment. We didn't know, but the parcels stopped coming in, this meant that all that had already come to an end. I say, I'll jump into the Danube some day, and when I grip some... There were perpetually some planks, beams were floating, after those bombardments. I'll grip it, and float downwards. I'll perhaps land down somewhere in Yugoslavia, or hide someplace elsewhere. This is how I was prepared, and so I say that we'll see tomorrow what's going to happen. If not, then I'll try to do something. They'll certainly not reach for my ones [i.e. relatives, family], 'cause the Russians have now sure come onto this side, here... So, now I can afford it, as I won't expose anybody. And still, during the bombing, I could've been killed. Well, and we went up, we're looking, and that's not there. The whole shed's been smashed. It turned out that in the night, the Englishmen applied such a... // the flights of the sort that there was one plane flying, dropped one bomb and flew away. I don't know whether it had any other [bombs]. In any case, with those bombs... We didn't know then that they had bombed the bridge in the night. How could they damn know that there was a bridge? Well, that could've been luck. The same thing goes for here. We're coming over, looking, and a bomb's sticking inside, all that bloody shit tumbled down. [*laughs*] It then turned out, for two months, or three, that each time I came to the point of letting it down, then I was helped by the Englishmen. A bomb was always dropped, and always destroyed it. And you could do [it] anew.

This is an intricate story about his privileged function in the camp: one that is placed high on the ladder of the camp hierarchy and thereby supersedes the image of the prisoner as victim, as functioning in the collective memory – too high indeed to be left uncommented on, or completely unexcused. His very casting in this role is shown as completely independent of the protagonist's will. On the contrary: it appears as a necessity imposed by the circumstances, a price paid for the courage shown in the very recently reported sabotage action. It later arises that this function was not a privilege but, rather, an onerous and stressful type of service, which involved being on watch, so that the subordinate inmates could quietly pretend that they were doing their assigned labour, the protagonist-narrator being responsible for their performance. The overall situation was already viewed then as hopeless and it was appropriate to take to flight. Yet, assistance from the heavens came at the eleventh hour. From the skies, to be sure – the British bombers postponed the date of completion of the construction, supporting the actors/prisoners in this whole construction masquerade. However, the intervention from the skies is not sufficient for my Interviewee to grasp and interpret all these construction-related experiences. This purpose is served by a meta-story, which can refer to a higher-level vertical dimension: the heavens. In fact, the reference is made at the

very beginning of this extensive engineering story. The narrator unfolds it in an open-ended manner, emphasising that this is basically one of the options for which to interpret his experiences, rather than an obvious truth about them: "I had a real lot of luck. This might be called a miracle, or whatever it was, and so on". In this somewhat witty and distanced fashion, the listener/reader is invited to make an effort to interpret the autobiography and comprehend – to the extent he or she is able to, or to the extent it is possible at all – the experiences of the biography.

And, this is where the unrestrained camp story starts to draw to a close. Starts to, as there remains one more episode, which reappears in most accounts of the survivors from Mauthausen and those numerous Mauthausen subcamps where the inmates worked in the drifts or grooves. This episode reappears in several variants – sometimes as a generalised knowledge, probably gained after the liberation, in some cases quite a long time afterwards. Or, sometimes, as in this particular case, as part of an individual camp experience (always forming part of the fate of the prisoners at large who survived till the end).

Well, and as it turned out that there is, // there already was, such a, signal that the American army is getting near, then they said that we should go out, for we'd be fired at; that, given this, we're going to these drifts. That's where we'll hide. I was surprised, for in the night, those who had remained from Linz I – they were taken care of by that *Rapportführer* who was at our site at that time. And that was but one block, one barrack in which we dwelled. There, he came in the night, and took several from there, and off they went. Once they had come back, I asked what he wanted. 'Ah well, nothing, nothing. You shall see, tomorrow.' It turned out that in the morning, they led us away from the camp. That was a few thousand people. The SS-men at the side, we inside. We were led into there, to those drifts. We came up there. We're watching, and all the entrances have collapsed. Everything... the entrances blown up, buried. You wouldn't tell what... You couldn't enter inside. I saw their annoyance, some consulting, some, whatever... In the end, it was resolved that we would come back again.

The differences between the accounts of the former inmates who tell stories about these events also appear with respect to the course they took. Based on Zygmunt's report, we would not be able to tell straight away with what purpose in all these prisoners were driven to the drift right before the liberation. Yet, the context of a generalised story of the last days in those camps, as well as the context of the inmates' individual narratives, suggests that this was to do with the SS's plan to erase the traces of the camp at those last moments. Not so much the material as the human traces: the prisoners were to be driven into the drift, the explosives detonated, and the victims covered up inside the rocky tunnels – together with their memory.²⁶⁹

269 In his *Mauthausen-Gusen. Obóz zagłady* (Warszawa 1979), Stanisław Dobosiewicz describes the various options of an identical liquidation action that the SS planned for the Gusen camp drifts (pp. 382–8). Among the documents quoted in this book is

At last, the narrator depicts a picture of his last camp experience – the scene of liberation, being one of the key scenes in any survivor’s recollections. Once again, his story differs from the few dominant patterns in the presentation of this scene which reappear in the accounts of the Mauthausen camp system. This Interviewee’s story differs as it follows the specific lines of his memory of that particular experience, although – as we have seen many a time – this explanation is insufficient: the interdependencies between experience, its memory and the narration of it are more complex.

On our way back, we were passing a bridge on the Danube when a plane came past. You could see, apart from these English signs, there was, moreover, the Polish checkerboard on it. It was nose-diving above that bridge, as we were walking there. Those Germans... everything [= all] jumped in... You could even see the pilot who was even waving his hand in there. And at that moment, as those our men fell upon these soldiers, they then disarmed them instantly. One managed to escape. Thus, he only shot himself at the head, and fell into the Danube. And the rest, we all returned to the camp, now without those, those... [SS-men (PF’s note)]. There was nobody. And in the camp, there was nobody. Now, a moment followed that we were thinking that the Americans were sure about to enter. But, somehow, you could see no Americans. So, you had to man the positions – those German ones, in order to keep watch. They positioned me, damn it, with a rifle on that turret again. There was a group of Germans passing by, started shooting, we almost broke our legs, to flee from that place. [*laughs*] I think, ‘Idiot! You’re shoving upwards, instead of sitting downstairs!’ So, I sat at the back, then I moreover covered myself, I was already sitting downstairs then. But, fortunately, they were escaping, so that only and exclusively such groups were passing there and they didn’t want to encounter us. And after three... [days (PF’s note)]. That was on the second – this was coincidentally my name day – the second of May, as we liberated the camp. And the Americans only entered on May the fifth. So, for three days we actually, like, struggled, or something like that. I had a mate who was a good Pole, he was a burglar who robbed things. He said, ‘I am a good Pole, as I stole things in Germany and sold them in Poland.’ [*laughs*]. Well, so he... among other things, right after we returned, opened all these locks which were there. So we had some food and we somehow endured those three days.

a record of a fragment of the testimony made by Franz Ziereis, the camp commandant: “In line with the order of the *Reichsminister* Himmler, following the command of Ogrf. Dr. Kaltenbrunner, I was supposed to annihilate all the prisoners. They were to be led to the tunnels, entrances of which were to have been bricked up before, with just one entrance left operational. Next, the tunnels would have been blown up, and the inmates driven into them”. This fragment is obviously part of the former inmates’ collective memory and has a bearing on their individual reminiscences from the last days before the camp’s liberation.

So, when was the Linz III camp actually liberated? All historical studies, and the official website of the Mauthausen Memorial (covering all the Mauthausen subcamps) give 5th May 1945, the date the U.S. Army arrived. The above-quoted account specifies: “the second of May, as we liberated the camp”. Who is right, then? Is it the former inmate, with his (otherwise quite exact) memory of his personal experience, or the historians researching the history of the subcamp? The dispute is actually apparent, and both parties to it can retain their own liberation credit²⁷⁰ – if we agree that the liberations of such camps were not always work so clear cut, being, in some cases – including the one in question – a process, a series of multiple events taking place at various locations, or stages. Mr Podhalański sheds light on just one of them – the one in which he himself acted. The role he assumed was, typically to his story, one of the central, if not simply the principal one.

There is a detail in this reminiscence that unveils to us the influence of a collective – or, more strictly speaking, national – consciousness as to what becomes registered and solidified in the memory (and, further on, in the narrative). Only a Polish prisoner could spot and interpret a white-and-red checkerboard painted on the plane’s body as the plane as being operated by a Polish pilot, who, moreover, was waving his hand through the plane’s window, and which simply confirmed that he was a Pole. It may be plausible, albeit rather astonishing, in any case, that the Polish checkerboard symbol was clearly visible on the plane, and a Polish soldier was its pilot. For the purpose of my investigation, however, it is not quite important who really was at that moment in the cockpit, at what height, and how clearly he could be seen with the naked eye from the ground. Of much greater importance is the experience of liberation that Zygmunt Podhalański has shared with me. An integral part of this experience is the Polish aircraft and the Polish pilot greeting the prisoners as they are liberated (with help from him, under Polish direction).

The last days and the last hours of the camp, as shown in the above-quoted scene, were a time of chaos: SS-men fleeing, the precarious seizure of control over the camp space by a group of prisoners, management of the catering, waiting for the approaching Americans. For my Interviewee, it was a time of fervent activity, seizing the initiative – ‘struggled, or something like that’ – and which was obviously fought within the enclosed space of the camp. There is no world existing

270 The ‘two liberations’ are not as easily ‘reconcilable’ in every single case, though. Perhaps the best-known example of such an acute conflict of memories is – or rather, was until the reunification of Germany – the liberation of Buchenwald, another concentration camp. When marching in on 11th April 1945, U.S. soldiers encountered the camp governed by resistance-movement prisoners (the SS crew had escaped before then). The legend of the camp’s liberation by communists and the history of the camp’s (leftist) resistance movement were among the essential constituents of the official memory of war in the DDR, if not the country’s founding myth.

beyond its limits, as yet. A Polish criminal, who is disdainfully called a 'green corner' in the camp nomenclature²⁷¹, suddenly becomes an ally – a smartass countryman, dodger, a Juraj Jánošík who robbed the Germans and sold the loot to his compatriots. He is a 'good Pole', and how essential his thieving skills are now! They are key, one could say: he needs no key to open the storerooms so that the liberated/non-liberated inmates be provided with food until their liberators appear from the outside, from beyond the camp universe. Without them, the process of (self-)liberation would not be concluded. The whole situation constructed in this image of memory has something of a carnival to it; thus, such a redefinition of the roles, or sudden twists, ought not to be surprising.

How different this story is from the images that are well known to us and which feature passive, hungry prisoners, scared till the very end, waiting for their liberators who appear as arrivals from a totally different world. Once their tank, on a *deus ex machina* basis, has crossed the camp gate, they are welcomed with shouts of joy and the singing of a national anthem. Another, no less traditional, variant which is graspable in memories and accounts, are when the shouts and expressions of joy of the others are heard: the story-teller is lying down totally weak on a plank bed in a barrack, waiting for any help to come, or just desiring to quietly slide beyond the edge of life.

Zygmunt Podhalański's account tells of no American tank, no cheering in honour of the liberators, no national anthem being sung. There is not a single, symbolic moment of liberation. The chaos of the last days behind the camp barbed wire smoothly turns into the chaos of the first days in the freedom. But this state of affairs would not last long: my Interviewee soon finds a point of reference that sets some order, and a meaning alongside it, for the actions taken at that time.

Later, we left there. I spent a few days in, such a, hunting lodge, where we stayed for a while... But, sitting around like that was a stupid thing too... They made up that camp, a common one for us. That Polish Camp 62 in Linz. And there, they came over to me and said, 'Come, we'll go there, 'cause what should we be...'. Well, and we moved into there. I've managed to get that striped clothing, the one I had, burned. There were not so many lice, but there were quite a lot of fleas. The Americans still disinfected us with DDT, they sprayed it everywhere, wrote down things. And well, we remained in that camp. More and more people started coming in there. Well, and, among others, likewise those from the [coerced] labours, // who had been on the labours. With their children. And the thing about that, for those children, something... somehow get the

271 The green triangle was used to mark prisoners detained in the camp for criminal offences. These were mostly Germans and Austrians, who assumed privileged positions as *kapos*, blockleaders, warders, etc. For the 'red corners', political prisoners marked with the red triangle, the 'greens' were a negative referencepoint. In opposition to the 'greens', the 'reds' built their camp-based identity as political prisoners. Exceptions to this stigmatising rule sometimes occurred all the same. See the account of Mirosław Celka, ref. no. MSDP_162.

time organised, for that, such a, chase on this... then, they'd be busy doing something, would make some... Something might happen to someone. So, we organised a school.

This fragment of the narrative may be astonishing. Zygmunt has made us become accustomed to stories of various happenings, the unheard-of adventures to which he was a central figure. One would expect, then, that with the several months in the camp over, he would make intensive use of his regained freedom and, like many of his camp fellows, start to cope with the state of overwhelming anomie, which was broken by existing rules and new ones that had not yet emerged. The bombed and partly deserted nearby town of Linz additionally provided excellent space for new adventures. Yet, his experience proves to be completely different. What he needs is to ground his actions upon some externally determined order, within some institutional framework. Contrary to a number of freed former camp inhabitants, he feels no aversion, disgust or anxiety about the camp – the notion as well as the actual institution. He reports at a transit camp for Poles – not only to wait till transported back to Poland, but primarily, to work there and to proactively shape the space of social interactions. The children arriving there become an important subject; they had accompanied their parents during their coerced labour in the Reich, while some of them may have been war orphans. It is them my Interviewee now centres his actions on. It is an important moment in his biography, with essential changes taking place, visible also in the construction of his autobiography. The central carefree character disappears. The story now lacks its previous zest: it is more serious now, other people becoming more significant.

If we were to apply a Schützean analysis, this particular moment in Zygmunt's biography being quite attractive for such an approach, we could say that what we are now facing is the protagonist's biographical transition, his metamorphosis. The disappearance of the earlier collective and individual trajectory of the concentration camp experience (against which his own resourcefulness and shrewdness have always been juxtaposed) becomes a moment in a completely new biographical phase that becomes reoriented toward the new values: caring for others, community service. A new biographical action scheme appears,²⁷² unlike that of the pre-war period, once this transition has occurred. The camp experience, reported in a rather light-hearted manner, turns out to be very deep and key for this reorientation, although this has not been expressed directly: we learn about it through our analysis of the autobiography, rather than the narrator's own commentary.

Also worth noting is the fact that after the camp was liberated, in May 1945, Zygmunt turned twenty-four. His age is an important and reinforcing context of this character's biographical metamorphosis, the moment he enters into a mature age – no longer an adulthood forced by the Occupation and the camp, into which he has so far been cast. Another event which, apart from his involvement in the

272 For a concise explanation of these Schützean notions, see K. Kaźmierska, 'Wywiad narracyjny – technika i pojęcia analityczne', in *Biografia a tożsamość narodowa*....

establishment of a school for Polish youngsters at the transit camp in Linz, ushers in a new biographical process is meeting his future wife, the first and wife that Zygmunt Podhalański had throughout his life, to whom he was married for several decades. This first encounter occurred before the camp was liberated. The memory, however, associated it with a different, post-camp experience and made it part of another phase of his biography. Hence, the related reminiscence appears only now in this narrative, although at the level of the events it evokes, it mainly complements the camp (or even pre-camp) story:

Meanwhile, added to all that, ... I met my future wife. She was in Linz too. In, such a, subcamp of Mauthausen. She was, // was active with the AK [= Home Army] in Silesia. I by the way have even got a book here on the activities of that, // her organisation there. She is mentioned there, among others. She was arrested and sentenced to death. She was, moreover, transported, together with her female friends, to Moabit,²⁷³ to Berlin. This train was bombed on its way. The documents, among other things, were bombed. And those Germans knew about it, that they were prisoners, but well, there was no documentation: who? what? what for?, etc. And they [said], 'Us, for nothing, 'cause they threw a piece of bread to them, to that one, there, // the camp ... that was near Katowice, Myslowice. They took us, but were to release us. And now we can see they're taking us, // transporting us to the [coerced] labour, or what.' And, somehow, you know... They spoke German, and they were moreover from the area of Silesia, so they were sentenced, being German citizens then, to a regular, what's it called... And well, they detained for some time, and took them to Mauthausen, as ... this was then the only option, to have them there. And there she was. I met her, for I was sent to that camp a few times, when something had to be done with the electricity. I had already learned enough to conduct the wires, or something like that, that much I could do. That was not a problem, all the more that, I say, even before the war did I do this, with radio sets.....

Well, then, since I knew these things, then I was going there, and I met her. She worked in the kitchen. She slipped me some grub there on the quiet. It sometimes happens that you're lucky, with someone giving a hand. For she'd always, something, there... // she'd offer a piece of bread, or something of the sort. And just as we came out of the camp, then I went there, to that squad of theirs there. Because she was [first] in Mauthausen and then she was moved there, to Linz. 'Is she alive, or not?' For you had to take into account... Well, and from then on we stayed together.

For former prisoners and coerced labourers working in the Third Reich, who right after the liberation did not return to Poland but spent a few (in rare cases, a dozen or so) weeks or months in various transit camps, this story of a camp, or post-camp, romance is a well-known scenario, even if it does not always end in a lasting marriage. The landmarks of the wartime biography of his wife, outlined in the

273 Moabit was a criminal court and prison in Berlin. The name also belongs to a district of Berlin.

background of my Interviewee's own story, show a shared space of experience between the husband and his wife: conspiratorial activity, arrest, imprisonment, transport – and, concentration camp. It turns out that before their paths crossed, they were similar – at least in a few points: it suffices if they are the landmarks, for the memory and for the awareness/consciousness, including the consciousness of the national component, so to put it. Instead of a private, ordinary story about meeting a beautiful woman, falling in love, etc., what comes to the foreground is a heroic-and-martyrological story. But the latter does not completely cover the former: we can access it more through the sound recording than the transcription. Hearing the way he phrases such as “Is she alive, or not?”, or, “for you had to take into account...” are expressed, we are somehow getting closer to the importance of the question my Interviewee asked himself at that moment. Whether the wording was exactly this, or something else, is unimportant. Of essence is a trace of that sentiment which, in spite of death-rate statistics, would not really have let him contemplate that she could be dead. Such a disregard, acting, in that very specific moment, contrary to a calculation, has let them stay together; similarly to their earlier parallel paths that preceded this stage.

This story also contains a trace of yet another meta-story, which blends the individual experience with the broader context of Zygmunt's own philosophy of being saved, as revealed many times in his narrative. The piece of bread, ‘or something of the sort’, he received from his future wife when doing electrical jobs at the camp where she was imprisoned becomes another instance that confirms the general rule whereby ‘it sometimes happens that you're lucky, with someone giving a hand’. This sentence, uttered in this place, is something more than merely an empirically-confirmed rule or social law: it is a fragment of the survivor's credo.

The work ‘with electricity’, mentioned by him during the story of how he has met his wife, once again leads the narrator's memory back (against the main line of the story), to his pre-war experiences. Their purpose is to explain why an electrician's job ‘was nothing of a problem’ for him. The digression on the ‘radio sets’ brings back, for a while, the adventures of the earlier period:

If not for the war, I would've probably invented a transistor. For I had got as far as making a sort of transistor, for which they wanted to pay me 120 zloty. This was big money for me at the time before the war. That was the year '39 already. I had the satisfaction that I walked with the set to the bank of the Danube, drove a nail into the ground, the earphones, and put [it] on a plate, and together with my friends we could listen, as I had an amplifier. It only had one shortcoming, that, damn, the batteries got exhausted very quickly. ... But we already had a portable set, the one like some, those ones, have today, so to put it. He wanted to buy it, and the damn thing [i.e. the opportunity] was gone, I didn't sell it, for, as I'm saying, it was such a one that no one had one like it. And they followed me everywhere and asked what's it like. But I was saying that nothing, I'm not going to reveal any secret. This is my secret. I said, ‘I shall patent it, end of story, 'cause it is, after all, my... // Only that it needs to be refined.’ Well, and once I was back again in year '39, then I put it into the cellar, buried that in

the cellar. Later on, they filled it with concrete in there, and that was the end of the story. But had I sold that, instead, I would've at least have had money. But it couldn't be helped, could it.

This digression has no continuation, it is a dead end. This is not to say it is unimportant in the map of memory. The concreted radio is, namely, a trace of non-materialised, just potential, imagined experiences, which may be elements of self-definition, constituents of identity.

But let us resume the main line of Mr Podhalański's narrative, following him as he proceeds, continuously constructing the subsequent images. In spite of the numerous digressions, comments, turns, he does his best to control the course of the narrative being built. One of the ways of not losing this control is to condense an entire fragment, or stage, of his biography into one expressive image. This density, narrated through a distinct example, is also a crosscut of the memory, not only of the narrative:

She [i.e. his future wife (PF's note)] was helping me with the books, the printing process, the polygraph. There was, like, a crank-operated polygraph, with the ink. We printed these books. Of the relevant examples... I lectured in physics, mathematics, and English. By the way, I learned my English a bit during the war, in the first, second year, for a wife of one of my colleagues spoke good English. And soon afterwards, they created courses in English for those who would like them. I started attending those courses, and what I heard at that course, I transmitted to the kids. And, well, there was a moment when I'm sitting in the classroom, and there were sixty of them, of that small fry, and I explain that and this to them, and that – the things I was capable of. Suddenly, I look and see – there's three Americans coming in. "Well then, I'm done", I think. I look at my watch, it's still ten minutes that I have to stay there. 'If he comes up to me and says [something] in English, then I'll understand nought of it, all the more that he's an American, then he'll be speaking with a completely different accent. And I shall completely, // I'll disgrace myself, before all those young men.' ... I remembered at that point, when I was on the train, when you would expect them to be inspecting around. My back [was] wet [with sweat], everything... I was completely lifeless, simple... When I finished, they come over to me and say, 'Hey you Pole, done a good job [*recording unclear*].' It turned out that [they were] Polish [*laughs*], just... Americans, but of Polish origin. And they, to me, there... Let's be frank to ourselves, once we went [out to socialise] then on, then we had a blast till, // till the morning. Satisfied, stories told all around...

An Occupation-time adventure juxtaposed with a class in English given to a group of Polish children in Linz – apparently, mutually incomparable experiences – shows how seriously he approaches his new role as a teacher. It is not that important whether the two events were linked in the course of the latter two or rather afterwards, as its ex-post interpretation. The assumption of the role of student is treated no less seriously; it cannot be otherwise, since every time it precedes and validates the role of teacher.

It is clear that the social world of the transit camp is jerry built, thoroughly makeshift (after all, it was established as such). However, this stopgap does not necessarily imply the abrogated responsibility of the actors, provided that they felt responsible, like my Interviewee, being strongly involved in their temporary roles as students, teachers, patrons, editors/publishers of books printed with a polygraph (copying machine), socio-cultural animators or managers (to use today's nomenclature), etc. There were probably many more such exchangeable roles to assume. The transit camp was not meant to be merely a place where the former camp inmates were to wait for transport back to Poland (or in the opposite direction) but an ersatz for the ordinary world – particularly for the children and young people who had been deprived by the war of their time for learning or studying, amusements, and personal development. Some, Zygmunt Podhalański and his wife among them, wanted to make up for this loss instantly, and they did so, with full dedication. There is an adventurous layer to this mini-story, too. The plot is struck up, followed by increasing tension, a climax, and a happy resolution: the protagonist crawls out of the woodwork, unembarrassed, and encourages us to perceive the whole event with a pinch of salt.

The following reminiscence around which the Interviewee's memory becomes focused is about his return to Poland. Similarly to many other accounts, a choice appears, with its implicated dilemma: to come back home, or, to go to the West? Express invitations can be heard from both sides; apart from the encouragement to choose the most appropriate destination, words of admonishment resound a warning against choosing the opposite direction. But, how to discern things at this biographical crossroads? There and then – without the later-gained knowledge that one stood at such a crossroads, but usually with a strong sense that somewhere, behind one's back, in the background, some drama of crucial importance is going on.

Later on, there was the question of, exactly, the return. So, some would be coming over from the West, saying, 'Don't you come back, 'cause they'll arrest you.' Others were coming from the East: 'Listen, our country needs to be rebuilt. You need to go there.' Well, and you were in a fix then, because those ones were arrested, others killed. That was a tough decision. At some point, they had the radio activated. There was no transport at that time, and you could not get out. They arrived on airplanes to take the French, others... // cars arrived. Well, the Czechs went on foot. The Russians, fearful, as they were picked up and pulled out, with beatings they take them out and back there. They took them into that Russian zone, as it was near Vienna at that time. And us? We were, for the time being... To go such a good way on foot, through the mountains, that wouldn't make the slightest sense. All the more so given that, [as] I'm saying: the propaganda varied. At last, the first transport was set to go. My future wife, for we were not a married couple then as yet, says the following thing: 'You know what, I'm going to go. Being a woman... // I'm not under as much of a threat as you might be. If it turns out that it's possible, then I'll let you know on the radio, for you to come back. If it turns out not to be, then I shall find the way to get across

afterwards.' And that's what we agreed. In November, I got the message to come back all the same, that my parents were waiting, after all, and so forth. Because she had already managed to communicate with my parents here... // that, all the same..., that nothing would happen to me.

Since none of the emissaries coming from the opposite directions turned out to be completely credible, some, like Zygmunt and his future wife, endeavoured to delay their final, 'very tough' decision on where to go; they instead make a temporary decision, with a removability clause appended to it. A risky initial reconnaissance – a trip from Poland back to Linz would have been a daredevil venture²⁷⁴ – was to be decisive as to the ultimate choice. Given the fast pace of this fragment of the narrative, it is easy to overlook what was decisive – and probably had the final say in this case – about their return to Poland: their nearest and dearest who were living and waiting for them, in most cases, their parents.

Of all the journeys in one's lifetime, the return, the way back, from the camp is usually – along with the transport in the exactly opposite direction – recorded the most strongly in the memory. My present Interviewee is no exception to this rule.

Well, and I was on my way back. The thing is, right at the frontier, [they stopped] me there... So, I was done about my return. [*laughs*] Fortunately, they released me, somehow.

Following my slightly directing question – “And, how did you travel back from the camp: by a transport, or on your own?” – which was not meant to reveal the details of that journey but, rather, to sustain my Interviewee's unrestrained narrative (which begins to accelerate at this moment), Mr Podhalański constructs an expressive picture of his way home:

There was a transport, which supposedly came to take the sick. I had, you know, rather good connections there again, for everybody knew me at the camp. Anyway, there was quite enough space. These were freight cars, lined with straw. There was, like, an oven in the centre, so you could boil yourself a tea, or something like that. It took us two weeks to travel from Linz to Międzygórze, there's that border checkpoint, via Prague. There, you could not come out. Międzygórze, or Międzylesie, I will have to check it with that slip of paper, as there are the two localities. Once I came there, well, they took, // detained a few of us. Interrogations, this, that, began. They didn't ask me about that school, they only asked about the time of the occupation, and so on. I say, I was in the camp. 'What were you guilty of?' I say, 'What do you mean, guilty? I was

274 The account of Adam Stręk, a former inmate of Auschwitz (and, later, of several other camps), as recorded within the same project, comprises a similar story of such an initial, identification-oriented journey, as well as an illegal return to the transit camp in Braunschweig and, finally, an 'official' return to Poland, together with his wife and her parents, former coerced labourers. See Oral History Archive, KARTA Centre, History Meeting House, ref. no. ISFLDP_054.

guilty of being a Pole.' And, with the obligation that I was registered in Nowy Sącz, they let me go at last.

We would not guess based on this account whether his 'good connections' in the transit camp were necessary, or whether he just used the opportunity of some available space in the wagon provided. An opportunity to return was created, after all, for all those who wanted to get back home – even if not at that particular moment, with this specific train for the sick. My Interviewee has just begun a story about a new adventure. Such narration requires that he be positioned in the centre of the occurrences he describes, ascribing to himself a possibly most active participation. There is a noteworthy small detail, which very rarely appears in such accounts: the journey back was made in a freight car. It may be presumed that this was not a unique means of transport in these post-war realities. My Interviewee mentions it in a purely informative, descriptive way; but since he does so, the question arises as to why his peers have almost never mentioned such a fact. At least some of them must have travelled in similar (or, perhaps, even worse) conditions then. The reason might be that being transported to a camp in a 'cattle car' is part of the experience's collective memory, in which an individual experience can be inserted. For a change, the return to Poland is a story of victory – and a thing like a 'cattle car' would somehow not suit it. Sometimes, however, as in the account under analysis, the survivor's private memory cannot be made part of the functioning patterns; it can be found contradictory to them, if anything. This individual memory evokes, it appears, a 'rather comfortable' journey, in a 'regular' wagon, to the camp in Austria, and the way back in a freight car with straw on the floor.

There is no symbolic gesture or image with which this narrator marks the moment of his return to Poland. He cannot even fully remember the first town in which the train stopped. In contrast, the situation of halting and interrogation is distinct and significant – quite typical, in fact, to those returnees who hung about before finally making up their mind to go back. The new authorities decided if the period between the liberation of a camp and the ex-prisoner's return was suspiciously long. Not only could a late return be suspicious: the reason, now redefined, for arrest and imprisonment at the camp was also taken into account. In the narrator's case, the reason was obvious. Obvious enough for him not to quite comprehend the question he is asked. The answer is easy: he ended up in the camp as he was a Pole. Thereby, he identified his national identity with involvement in underground activity, struggling against the occupying power; the price he paid for this activity was prison and the camp. He is not yet aware that his understanding of Polishness, the patriotism which developed before the war, was now deprived of official empowerment. A different version of Polishness than the one he fought for and was put into a *kacet* for had been victorious. He will still experience it, several times. For the time being, he may continue his journey back home – or rather, a story of it.

But the transport that had been supposed to go to Kraków had already gone, and you stayed there, it had a twenty-four hour delay. Then, I waited for some trains to go in

that direction. And, on my way back, I naturally got that border-crossing evidence, I got one hundred zloty, so I also say to myself, 'I'm a rich boy.' At last, there was a train, which I got on in Nysa. Even there they carried tea around, so I'm saying, I'm going to order some of that tea. 'How much?' '70 zloty.' [*laughs*] And I readily gave over my money. That was worth the one hundred zloty I got at the border.

This micro-scene featuring a glass of tea costing 70 zloty is another deviation from a typical return story. The amount of 100 zloty is indeed often mentioned: this amount was received by former prisoners on their return to Poland, after crossing the border and registering with the State Repatriation Office. A concrete image exemplifying how this money could have been used, and additionally defining a low value to the amount, is rather rare, however.

This comes as yet another disillusionment making larger the gap between the return experience and my Interviewee's earlier ideas and expectations with respect to the country he had decided to come back to. This adverse difference, the disappointment, is prevalent for the climate of the entire journey being reported. Yet, there is a hint of humorous distance to what is being recollected – after all, these adventures happened years ago:

Well, and so I was back. I've arrived in Kraków and now, you need to get to Sącz. But, how? It turned out that the bridge, // that the tunnel has collapsed and the trains are only going ... // You can get there, but only via Chabówka. But the train [goes] once a day there, somewhere some train of a sort could be caught. I went to ask where they depart from. 'From Płaszów [an area within Krakow]'. From Płaszów, OK, from Płaszów. But how to get to Płaszów? Got no money. There were hackney coaches, but I'm asking if he would take me. And I had with me a really rather big bundle. For we were getting there those UNRRA parcels. So, they had sewn it round for me with blankets. I had, almost three such cases that I pulled about, and a small bag for food. And I say to myself, 'How to get with this to Płaszów?' Lastly, I caught a, the one... Would he fetch me, for the cigarettes? I had my cigarettes, but of those cigarettes, I had two packs perhaps, and the rest was in those packages. I would have had to ... cut it open to get to them. And I say to him that I've got two packets. 'Ah, then I can only transport you to Podgórze [a district of Krakow].' That train's route included Podgórze. I say, 'Well, good then, but, is the train there?' 'Yes, it stops there, it arrives there.' Well then, good, then I'm going to Podgórze. I've come to Podgórze – there's no one there at the station. Bloody bad. I went to the stationmaster, to ask, and he says, 'Well, there's a train going through here, and stopping.' It will be somewhere there... It was eight or something, the evening – it was dark already when I arrived there, cannot remember the time. 'But', says he, 'will you get in?' I say, 'What do you mean, get in?' 'Well, then you shall see when it is here.' Oh you should've seen that train arriving. The freight cars and the passenger carriages. That is, on the roofs, on the buffers, ... the people were sitting everywhere. There was a freight car, and so they sit, // the people sit in the open doors, their legs loose. ... Inside there, inside the carriage, it was dark. Outside there, I still could see those people. There was a light bulb, it was only just lit, on that station, a stop [it was], sort of. What should I do? I'm not going to get on, I've got no chance to

get to Płaszów, as I have nothing to offer in exchange. The only possibility: go, forcefully. And, not thinking too much, I caught one parcel, through that door, // the gate, it threw [it] inside there, the second, the third, I jumped in myself, and, to the corner! And there, in the dark. What I then heard about myself, about the boorishness, about everything else, I wouldn't hear it ever in my life. I said nothing, I just snuggled in that corner. I say, 'Nothing, not a word!' They were swearing, I don't know, all the way to Chabówka, I suppose, more and more silently, more and more silently, to be sure. There was nothing to harm them with, because all that was very soft. Those were [i.e. It was so because of] the blankets, stuffed so thickly, this is what I had managed to carry from those, there... Nothing happened to anyone there, although they shouted, 'He broke my leg!', 'He cracked my head' But later, it somehow turned out later on that I didn't fracture anyone's head, or leg. And, as a final result, that faded away, and the folks fell asleep. Only from time to time someone honked, and suddenly, I can hear a voice, like, saying, sideways: 'Do you know that Podhalański has survived?' What's that? Is that something about me? It says, 'And how do you know, madam?' 'Well, you know, don't you, that I work at the post office. There was some lady calling up, some woman from Katowice, and she said to Mr Podhalański's father, whom we had already called in, that his son has survived and is due to come back here.' 'That means, he's alive?' And there, discussion started on my having been arrested, etc. And thus, I'm waiting, waiting, waiting – and am saying at a certain moment, 'In that case, I apologise to all of you together, but this is, specifically, me, at this moment.' 'Is this you?!' At the stop, they carried my luggage away, everything, so that I get back [home]. ... Obviously, a hackney came along at once, took me, for I'm saying that I'm not paying anymore. Then, they'll pay [for] me there. And so I returned home.

Also this story of his return home comprises the reminiscence of an episode which transgresses a typical communication situation as otherwise happening when travelling. Here, the narrator, listening to ordinary chitchat on the train – probably, similar to many other conversations that were audible in this very crowded place – suddenly, and most unexpectedly, switches from one role to another. From a 'churlish' passenger, forcing his path through with his bundles where there is no more room available, he all of a sudden becomes the long-awaited-for 'our' hero who has been lost and found. And, it is for him to resolve at which moment the turn of the plot is to occur. He lingers in order to be capable of secretly attentively listening to a biographical story of himself, constructed by the local community who instantly, through communication of this kind, filled the space after the absent man was gone. Due to the lack of other data, this story is also based on concepts or ideas; hence, death, being lost in a prison or camp, being a rational option at that time. The great astonishment of a female passenger: 'That means, he's alive?' is to be explained in these terms.

Zygmunt's account of his post-war biographical experiences is not as coherent and continuous as the one regarding his wartime vicissitudes. To be continued, it needs

the support of some questions. Some of them can trigger the subsequent images, consecutive stories; some are responded to with short, to the point answers. The previous section of his narrative, long and unrestrained, was easier for him as it had its preconstruction in the form of reminiscences written down a couple of years earlier. My Interviewee's memory has already made an effort to set the experiences in an order, systematise them and tailor them to the narrative line. The effect of this effort was a textual utterance; now, a sound recording of an oral story has been produced. Although the forms framing the voice were completely different in these two cases, the situation of the communication being dissimilar – now, that earlier effort could, and indeed has been, used. This occurs quite unknowingly, since each subsequent biographical story reaches back not only for the experiences it evokes but also to the preceding stories. It so happens that – although certainly not in this particular case – the survivors tend mechanically to reproduce their established, petrified and long-dead story. There are some, however, who are moved to tears every time they report their story.

There was one more reason for why we have changed the situation of our communication. At this point, rather than remaining seated at the table and talking, Mr Podhalański preferred to be walk around the room, fetching some photo albums and getting the photographs out. Short stories develop around these photographs too – inspired by them or, additionally, by the questions I ask in relation to them. This intermediation essentially modifies the entire interaction and, quite obviously, informs the content and form of the sound that has been registered, thus shaping the testimony now available in our archive.

The intercourse with this second part of the account is not as comfortable as the analysis of the first. The listener (and transcript reader) easily gets lost amidst the chaos of fragments, digressions, excursions. The narrator has ceased ensuring that the images he evokes alternate, form an unfolding, densely-woven story. This constructional task is now assigned to the researcher, who finds it all the more difficult now that he or she has to tackle it on their own: the Interviewee, when inquired, only gives fragmentary suggestions. He does not care about the final outcome. Zygmunt's attitude to what he states in the second part of our meeting is well illustrated by the passing remark he makes at some point: "But I'm not sure if you're still interested, because that was the later period, after the war".

Let us all the same make an effort and identify the main threads of this piecemeal autobiography. An important guideline for our exploration is the following fragment, appearing in the final section of the first, unrestrained part of the narrative:

Later on, I was obliged to get my residence registered. But that, it is a completely different story, in our [i.e. Polish] territory. I reported, for I had already had one completed, during the occupation. The first year in Economy completed, with that Higher Economic School. I reported for year two, and was accepted, obviously. But after three months, the Rector called me in and says, 'I am really sorry for you, but you will unfortunately have to leave. We have got a memo that we're not supposed to have you [with us]. You are supposed to register for residence in Nowy Sącz, rather than

staying in here.’ After that, I reported once again, for, the Thaw... I reported once again, and, the same situation. I reported to get a passport – there’s no, // no way for me to get a passport. This was all improved only in the late sixties, when I even received a passport for those People’s Democracy countries. Only later on, when I had already retired, I got my passport. I could even go to the West then. The thing was quite plain, for if he flees, then we would not have to pay [him] any retirement pension. I can comprehend it quite well. [*laughs*]

The leitmotif here is a series of odd episodes and incidents of harassment that Zygmunt encountered after the war – right after he had returned from the camp and, later, over many subsequent years, in various situations, well after he retired. His retirement opens another stage in his biography.

Zygmunt’s parents lived throughout the war in Nowy Sącz; hence, he returned from the camp to his family home, quite literally so. But the fact that he was about to return, and even finally reached his destination, does not mean that he could settle in that house as a resident. Before the end of the war and his arrival, there were changes that he would not have expected. Yet, he kept his wits about himself as usual, once again proving how resourceful and resilient a man he was. As we learn, he ascribes similar characteristics to his parents; these traits must have been an important element in the socialisation of their son. This is what we can learn, in any case, from the account which not only constructs an image of Zygmunt returning home but now also familiarises us with certain hitherto unmentioned events that took place before his arrest:

My parents survived the war also because of this – I say that everything was just as well and lucky. My parents had a shop in the market square. In the year ‘39, during the war, they were selling all the goods they had in stock. But, fortunately, they didn’t let them go to waste but had a house built, next to it. It was almost an open-shell the moment I returned. For, any money they got from the merchandise, they loaded it into the bricks [i.e. bought bricks for this money] and were building that house. As I was back, there arose a situation then whereby I had no place where to live. The reason was that the house was partly damaged, and beside it, at that time ... they started to govern, and to my room, which I had renovated for myself still during the war – they had been building that house since 1939. I made for myself, in the attic – as it is in here – one room for me. I worked, so I had the money, and besides, I could do many things on my own, and so I did. And, they put a woman with a child in there, to whom they said she’s in charge there. Hence, she was in charge in the way that she’d relieve herself by sitting on the handrail and dropping [the faeces/urine] down, and saying, ‘The owners are here to clean up. When they were building [the house], they could have made a latrine for me here upstairs.’ And well, I got there, and there was no chance at all, I couldn’t get registered. They didn’t want me to be registered, for I have no residence, ‘cause I have nowhere to live. But, well, in the place where the house now stands, I made a dugout for myself, covered it with an awning, took a couch from the house, and off I went. I got registered thanks to my colleagues. I said, ‘What do you mean? I’ve got a flat! I don’t want any other.’ And that’s where I resided.

The situation which, if reported by someone else, could have become a family tragedy – a business suddenly put an end to by the war; a damaged house; an unwelcome billeted lodger; the loss of a place of one's own in which to live, which had once been built by the would-be dweller: all this we find here reported on with humour and distance, as yet another challenge cast to the protagonist. He would dig a dugout for himself, in his parents' field neighbouring onto the house (today, the house where we have our conversation stands on this very site) and establish a temporary residence for himself there. Instead of animosity or despair, he expresses his joy as he has once again fulfilled his own will. A scratch has appeared on the image of the self-made man, though: instead of a commentary stating that everything had been achieved by his own inventiveness and resoluteness, an interpretation is given: "everything was just as well and lucky".

Overlapping with this history of wrestling with the new, post-war authorities is a much more convoluted story of a bookbinding studio he ran with his soon-to-be wife shortly after the war. Zygmunt's in-laws had in fact run the workshop before the war and managed to reclaim it afterwards – for the time being. As it turns out, involvement in the conspiratorial movement was not the only shared point in the map of this couple's experiences, when still unmarried. Much earlier, they had belonged to similar social worlds: Zygmunt was the son of a shopkeeper; his wife, the daughter of a bookbinder. But, as there was no house to which one could return to and settle, similarly there was no business that would wait for its owners to come back and resume operations. The house needed to be constructed, while the binding machines had to be dug out of the debris.

My wife had a printing house and a bookbinder in Wodzisław Śląski. ... And as we were back, then we had virtually nothing. Nor did I, as the house here was damaged, there pillaged and destroyed. We had nothing. Her, the same thing: when she was back, she had nothing. So, as I returned here, as I got in touch with her, I started travelling to Katowice, then we went there, to Wodzisław, and started pulling the machines out of the debris. And, on the basis of these machines, we made, // we established a business. ... A dozen or so people were employed. We made school copybooks, and the like. Such was the company. All the brothers joined there, the whole family, there...

In that devastated world, my Interviewee did not act single-handedly. This post-war effort is depicted as a shared, family undertaking, involving both families: Zygmunt's and his wife's. This account shows the drive with which people got on with constructing and reconstructing, not only buildings but also social relations, community bonds – family ties included, if not at the forefront: shared efforts and work of this kind supported their integration, reinforcement, the remedying of wartime waste.

The trace imprinted by the war, particularly by the camp experiences, proves lasting. One cannot simply and ordinarily restart his or her life 'from this point now on', dissociating from what is past. Even if the *kaczet* were from the 'handheld' consciousness by strength of will and a maximum involvement in the present, one can never fully dissociate from it. A lasting trace has remained at the physical, somatic level.

In the first place, I got down to having money in some way. Since my wife, // my future wife was already running that one, and I stayed in touch with Katowice, so from there I started drawing those copybooks to Sącz, and there I opened a shop for selling these copybooks to the area of Sącz Land. You could always make some money, taking the opportunity. And, thanks to it, I had that income, of a sort. It would be hard to talk about the school still at that moment, for in 1945... I had to see the doctors for the whole of that year. Because I ... had already had many afflictions, which I've had until now, in any case. First of all, my aorta were calcified after the typhus. The teeth, which had to be put in order. Those dentists had made up the teeth, like, on pins for me, on needles, down to my roots. But that wouldn't stay fixed now, so many years after. Everything had to be changed. And that was not that simple. After the typhoid, all those afflictions... and, the heart. Besides, a very strong neurosis, which caused me incessant convulsions, when I was a little irritated by somebody. And so, that year was in fact not mine at all. After all, it was afterwards still repeated after the rough ride that followed. It was repeated with me. I had an infarction only in 1956, moreover. Until this very moment, after all, let me be frank, I've been actually living on credit, as they say.

All of a sudden, a different layer of this autobiographical story is unveiled. Or, another version of it, because instead of the post-war activities which have just been featured, we now meet the statement that "that year [i.e. the first year after the war] was in fact not mine at all". There, one finds no adventures, or examples of personal virtue; there is no luck or miracles. There is, instead, his health, ruined by the war – physical as well as psychical. Although so different (while concerning the same stage in this biography), these stories do not cancel each other out, and instead prove to be mutually complementary. It is only the completely different narrative style used in each of them that may mislead us and makes us doubt that these are the experiences of one and the same person.

This personal tone, an 'unguarded moment' on the part of the narrator, and deviation from the dominant narrative form do not last long. My Interviewee resumes the method he previously applied in constructing his autobiographical story. Running and contributing to a business of his own is an important episode in this biography – the field of new clashes, grist to the mill of biographical adventures. These skirmishes and adventures somewhat resemble his involvement in the Occupation-time conspiratorial activities – obviously, without military equipment, and with reasonable proportions. And they end up in a failure too: a private workshop, rebuilt, was doomed not to survive in the new political reality, once the eradication of private enterprise began.

Everything would've been just all right, if not for the war of our dearest minister Minc, who declared war against industry and commerce.²⁷⁵ But this is a completely different story now. And all that unfortunately had to be... Well, I managed to return all that,

275 What Mr. Podhalański has in mind is, most probably, the so-called 'commerce war' [Polish, *wojna o handel*]; more specifically, its consecutive episode from 1949. It is

without much of a surcharge, from there. And, on the basis of this machinery, four cooperatives were formed. Among other things, in our cooperative here, I brought the machines. I opened one of the departments with these machines.

And in the cooperative here in Sącz, I created one department. I was not supposed to work as a clerk, as a white-collar. And I only worked here as a workman. ... But, I was a foreman, I had those... // I worked with a paper cutting machine. That's what we were doing there, I busied myself with it. Not for long, after all, for I was soon made chairman of the council... ... I worked for them twenty-six years. First as a foreman, then as council chairman, then I was technological manager for some period of time. Then, I was deputy president for trade. With that, I finished.

The history of the loss of his own enterprise, the result of its confiscation and its being parcelled out to a few production cooperatives, an operation sanctioned by the law, is now reported in a distanced and humorous manner. This makes it easily woven, along with the other adventures of this narrator's life, into the entire autobiography being constructed. When more specific questions are asked, it turns out that the experience in question proves to be one of the most significant in his post-war biography:

A situation arose when they declared war on private industry and trade, then, the best way, and it was conducted everywhere, [was] that you were caught for any trifle. The surcharge imposed was so high that somebody had to... They'd take off everything he had, and that's it. A thorn in [their] flesh was that whole company of ours, as they could find nothing. Because I was well-versed in accounting, so I kept the books where everything was balanced, to the letter. ... I had everything calculated so exactly that it was even reckoned that there was 0.00001 mg of the paint needed per one copybook. Well, there was nothing to catch. So, they sent over... // First, there was one inspection visiting, they found nothing, so later, twelve of them came over. They stayed for around almost two weeks, being very picky. They found nothing. They, well, would've had nothing that would stick, absolutely. Every single thing was [made] so exact that you couldn't find anything. They were inspecting, observing, for I could see, couldn't I, that they're observing whether there's someone coming in, there's someone coming out. They found nothing.

worth mentioning that there exists a considerable collection of pieces of autobiographical material referring, in multiple instances, to similar events: what I have in mind are the memoirs submitted to the competitions held a few years ago by the KARTA Centre under the titles: *Na marginesie: "prywatna inicjatywa" 1945–89* and *Prywaciarze 1945–89*. The latter title (meaning 'private entrepreneurs' – with a hint of irony, if not sarcasm, given the realities of the communist regime) was also used for a book containing memoirs and photographs from the same contributions.

At last, there came, // two, such, gentlemen came over, dressed elegantly. I had homespun clothing on, 'cause you could buy no fabric, but their clothes were hum-dinger. Bright suits, the gentlemen, like, elegant ones. [They said] That they don't believe that here, you could, // that it's all like this, in order. This being the case, they had arrived to do a super-inspection. It appeared that this was the Head of the Inland Revenue Office in Katowice and in Kraków. Those two gentlemen came over to have us controlled. And so they sat there, the desk was with, like, a sloping roof at the top. We're sitting, and they're checking and checking so. They've been sitting one hour, two hours. One by one, everything, just everything, is in order. And suddenly, a lad comes in, one of my employees, and says, 'Sir, a machine, for us, well you know, can we take off the parts?' 'Do take them off. Just give me back that broken one.' He came in, placed a ladder and opened at the top, like, a hatch, which was almost invisible. He opened that flap and went inside. Those men, as they saw it... 'A hidden storeroom! Yeah! Got it!' I say, 'Gentlemen, stop, there is...' They started clambering up this ladder. I say, 'Listen, you're going to ruin your clothes, you'll damage everything, 'cause there's a plenty of lubricant and oil. There are only machinery parts up there. You've got here on the files, everything whatever is there.' 'No, there's a hidden storeroom there.' And up they went. I say, 'Then, take your coats.' No. They went up there, what were they like. You should've seen them when they came back. That, given the whole mess around, almost made me laugh. Smudged with the lubricant, smudged with all that, for it was tight up there. Had to walk around kneeling, to be able to find anything. They went out enraged, checking nothing else, they even didn't want me to sign anything, [saying] that they'll have it sorted out for them. And off they went. A moment or so after, I'm getting a phone call from the Inland Revenue. There was, like, a girl. ... Says she, 'Sir, do you know that your case has been put through ... to the workers' and peasants' committee? They're going to compare you with a jeweller, that your turnover figures are not balanced.' Once I heard this, then I'm saying, 'Well, this is the end.' You mind it, what turnover might a jeweller have per person, raw material included, and what sort of the figure could I have, with the paper? If they compare this for me, then there's nothing left. For me, the case was simple. I only rewrote the inventory ledger cards. The workmen signed them. Stocktake – and I went and returned the card. And had my company wound up. On that same day. And I said to myself, 'I'm winding up.' I convened a meeting [to tell the others] that a cooperative would be set up in this place, we had decided. We created a cooperative....

I did it the way that I opened one [= cooperative] of my own. This range of products, raw materials that were being manufactured, needed to be completed. That one was called 'Braclaw' ['Bratslav'], and I opened, under my name, 'Trzy Kotwice' ['Three Anchors'], thus was the business called. For two months I worked there with one binding technologist who finished off everything that there was. This we carried to Sącz, transferred in here, and sold it here in Sącz, at the shops. And we all moved, so we came over here in September. And I started working from September for this cooperative here.

The way this little story is constructed is, again, typical to this entire narrative: ridiculing the tax inspectors, the artfulness of the protagonist and, lastly, a lucky way out of the breakneck and seemingly hopeless situation: although a private business is to be closed down, he and his crew can work from now for a manufacturing cooperative, using part of the former firm's assets, doing almost the same things. This latter element is particularly worthy of our attention, as it leads us beyond analysing the form of this narrative and the external, plot-related cloak of its content. It namely reveals a crucial biographical process, entangled in the then on-going social processes.

Extermination of private entrepreneurs – who were colloquially termed *prywaciarz* – is shown not as the ordinary confiscation of their property but as a process of entangling them in the new system. This game is however constructed in such a way that a robbed *prywaciarz* remains an important subject of the process: he is active with a cooperative, sometimes also as its cofounder, running the new business on the debris of his former enterprise. The obvious condition was that he would accept, to some minimal extent, the rules of such a superimposed game – such as by considering it to be the lesser evil, or through a willingness to save as much as could be saved, given the circumstances. Beside the economic calculation (one had to have some means of subsistence) and fear of even more severe repression, another highly important aspect of such an adaptation and fast apprenticeship in his new role as cooperative organisation worker was perhaps his attachment to the work he performed, with its daily routine, the objects manufactured. Employment with the cooperative offered an opportunity for such an elementary continuation – be it behind a new facade, in a situation now redefined from higher up. In spite of the change in the perception and experience of the social world, some managed to maintain a sense of biographical continuity: “I have always said that if there's anything to be done, let it be done well”.

The economic thread is one of many in Zygmunt's jagged narration about his post-war experiences. Another thread is political: his own involvement in the 'inappropriate' conspiratorial faction in the Occupation period and, even more so, his family members' involvement in the anti-communist armed underground movement are now stigmatised. The stigma of being 'bent' or 'unclean' meant in this case an obligation to report weekly on a regular basis to the local authority. More dramatic situations occurred too – even the detention of Zygmunt in the same cell where the Gestapo had him interrogated a few years earlier.

And then, they came along and wanted to confine me ..., as my brother-in-law was in the National Armed Forces. And, he was, // had a death sentence after the war, didn't he. And he had a lot of luck too....

There came almost twelve of them. They took me away. I was still at [my father's (PF's note)] shop at the time. They drove me out of there. Took me to that very cell. I stayed there for some time. Then, they came, took me and say that we're going. I'm thinking, where are they transporting me to? Frankly speaking, I was a bit scared. ... We're going, and going. I'm asking, 'Where are we going?' 'How's it you don't know

where we're going? Your home.' I say, 'But that's a completely opposite direction. We're going to the [railway] station, aren't we?' Well, and we returned here, home, to my place here. ... They led [me] into here, // to my parent's, and here, set up a dragnet so he [i.e. my brother-in-law (PF's note)] be caught. But he hadn't been here for long yet. ...

My arrest also ended in a rather ridiculous way. That is, I was then so accustomed to that interrogation that I wouldn't even pay attention to what was going on. For you would come in, repeat the same thing each time, that, where you were and what you did during the occupation. I say that, what, I was in the camp. 'You've got your lists, to the camp and from the camp. Why are you following me around?' ... As I came there, then it always followed the same pattern, that he [i.e. the investigating officer] took out a pistol, put it on the desk, and, 'Spit it out, you, son-of-a, such and such, what was it like in that time.' And I was telling that so and so. 'Sign it, and you can go.' I signed. ...

[This] was repeated every week. Every week, every Friday I had to report. ...

And they called to come here. I had, on Friday, as I said, to report at this place. There was an incident when I was travelling from Warsaw, I arrived in Katowice, and from Katowice I quickly came here. And I was making my way, so I asked the train attendant, when I laid myself down on a shelf to get some sleep, to get there in the morning. And I requested him just to wake me up. I attached myself with a belt, so I wouldn't fall in the night. And thus I travelled. There was once an incident that someone is pulling me, I get up and see that it's some soldiers, damn it, with rifles. They pulled me down from there and say that I wanted to flee. 'Where did I want to flee to?!' It turned out that in was in Muszyna, there at the border already. Real trouble began, for I had no passport, nothing. Fortunately, the attendant was honest enough so he ran over and says, 'I am really sorry, I completely forgot to wake you up before Sącz.' I had a ticket to Sącz. They only watched me up to the point that I returned on the next train for Sącz. And well, I was late here. They didn't quite believe me at first, but they must've communicated with somebody else, as they accepted this.

All this takes place during the first couple of years after the war, still before 1950. It is roughly in the same period that certain events of crucial importance to my Interviewee occurred. He runs a bookbinding company which is eventually turned into a cooperative productive society; gets married; starts his studies in economics in Katowice but is disqualified afterwards; and, also becomes involved in the milieu of former concentration camp prisoners:

From the very beginning [i.e. right after the war (PF's note)] I barged into that. Once the Polish Association was set up. I registered myself at once, that I shall... ... because they had requested me. We took over some of the shops here. Those houses which the deceased had donated were taken over by the Association.²⁷⁶

276 Established very shortly after World War II and operating autonomously until integrated in a centralised structure of the ZBoWiD, the Association of Former Political Prisoners was a powerful and energetic organisation providing support and

And, it is then that Zygmunt finds great healing from the illnesses he has inherited from the camp, while also making use of the skills he learned during his camp labours to start building a house. This is one of the rare examples of positive camp-related socialisation appearing in an overt fashion in a former inmate's account.

I built that house, in fact, with my own hands, mostly. I did the excavation on my own, laid the [wall] footing myself, as that's [what] I learned in the camp. We wouldn't have been able to afford to buy it, would we. I can remember, when we were back in Sącz, the apartment wasn't there, there wasn't anything. I said that you've got to get down to constructing, ought to do something.

Zygmunt's unusual activity in the post-war period – otherwise, a rather frequent phenomenon among former prisoners²⁷⁷ – constantly came across a resistance, subject to repression. But this period is not evoked in terms of struggling. It is, rather, an attempt to adapt to a new, no less dynamic system, which is just taking shape and somehow responds to signals from the outside. Zygmunt courageously

assistance to former prisoners. It ran its own retail outlets and owned real properties. As recollected by a former female prisoner: "Our Association started numbering more than seven hundred people from Rzeszów alone. We were assigned an office room, in the town's centre; a board was formed. And, they started applying for some privileges, subsidies. We first received a licence for opening dry goods stores. We opened a few shops, in Rzeszów and in the field; a fabrics and textiles shop was made in each country [*powiat*]. We were receiving some apportionments with excellent commodities. So, people were queuing in front of our shops, as these were the first Polish shops with things of this particular sort. There were four such in Rzeszów alone. Our [member-]prisoners were employed with those outlets. They generated considerable profits. Part of them we had deducted for Warsaw and another part we could use on our own. A project arose for building our own house for the Association of Former Concentration Camp Prisoners where we would meet, pursue a cultural life and help one another. And indeed, our [member-]prisoners made a layout for the house. Later on, we dug the foundations, assisted the construction process and soon, within a year or so, we had a large one-storey house erected at Chopina St. in Rzeszów. We commenced our activities there. Unfortunately, the regime was changing. Our Association of Former Concentration Camp Prisoners was absorbed by the ZBoWiD. In the first years, we prevailed, but later, as people from other associations started flowing into ZBoWiD – the 'consolidators of the people's rule', former militia men, UB [Security Office] men, then we withdrew from that activity. Our retail outlets were closed down soon after. Our building was taken away. And thus the operations were terminated". Cf. the account of Stanisława Imiołek, available at the KARTA Centre/History Meeting House Oral History Archive, ref. no. ISFLDP_058 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner).

277 Such hyperactivity has been recognised as a manifestation of so-called KZ-syndrome, as described by A. Kępiński and his Krakow students. See, inter alia, M. Orwid, op. cit.; therein, in particular: *Rozmowa 5: O programie oświęcimskim, badaniach traumy poobozowej, o pracy doktorskiej*, pp. 159–179.

searches for his own path: not contrary to the order being imposed on society – in contrast to his brother-in-law, for instance – but alongside this order, on its peripheries (yet, within the limits set by it).

The differing social universes between which my Interviewee prevaricated at that time have been somewhat familiarised and controlled by him, perceived as local and as if not completely serious. Yet, this period was certainly not easy for this former prisoner, now a persecuted man; formerly a Home Army soldier, today, an inimical *prywaciarz*... Even his arrest and interrogation sessions are evoked as if they had been conducted by his school friends, now impersonating the local rednecks, legitimised by the State authority. These scenes feature no pathos of struggle for real independence, there is no ‘fight against the commies’ or being fought by them. What it resembles is, rather, a melancholic play that needs to be staged, as this is what the directives from above tell the people to do, whilst both sides approach their roles indulgently.

At last, somewhere around the middle of the 1950s, this transitional but quite crucial stage in his biography comes to an end: the time of uncertainty, flouncing about, never-ending determination of the course of a possible way in the life. These personal findings were not based upon a quiet reflection – even if there was one, we do not know about it; in fact, they stemmed from his personal experiences, which were verified as they appeared. At least, this is the way they are presented in Zygmunt’s autobiographical story.

The mid-1950s and especially the year 1956 are not a casual watershed opening a new stage in this biography. Although we learn of this indirectly, the change in the political situation in Poland, the Thaw initiated by the ruling communist party leader W. Gomułka in 1956, essentially influenced the external context of action, including on the local level in the Nowy Sącz area. For Zygmunt’s entire family this marked a rather crucial moment, as testified by the sentence interposed in passing:

Because my brother-in-law revealed himself in 1956, lived in Warsaw, and I lived at his place [when arriving to take classes as part of his extramural studies in Warsaw (PF’s note)].

The discerning element of the subsequent stage of his biography, which can be reconstructed based on the, now quite fragmentary and jagged, narrative is his involvement in ‘socio-cultural activities’ and in arts and crafts. This activity, which began in fact somewhat earlier, now becomes central to this autobiography. His basic professional work now recedes into the background. Moreover, the experience of a game played with the authorities, so important previously, has now become less, and soon fades away.

Beside this [i.e. the work in the cooperative, which he now calls ‘working for them’ (PF’s note)], I ran the ‘Lachy’ ensemble, which I had set up. ... In 1956. But, there are [= were] certain intricacies. Why? Because I set up this ensemble as soon as I arrived [in Nowy Sącz, to settle there for good (PF’s note)] in the ‘50s, saw that our women

were dancing some... 'Cause an ensemble had been formed there... And I was made chairman of the council and simultaneously, with the committee, // chairman of the culture committee [within the cooperative productive society – PF's note]. As I saw it, I say, 'Shit, we have so many nice dances. What's this for?' I met my teacher, whom I know dealt with these matters. And he said to me that he had a lot of songs collected from the Sącz Land. And he has them written down. I asked whether he would be willing to manage an ensemble like this. He says, 'Why not, we can do it.' I called them together, and we formed such an ensemble – there, in the cooperative, at first. For the first time, our performance was [given] five years after the war, which means that must have been around 1951, 1952. We even made an appearance in Warsaw. There was trouble, though, as they were unwilling to approve our lyrics, because for instance, there was a text that 'blessed human kindness'. 'What sort of a blessing you're fabricating hereabout?', etc. That censor, here, of Sącz. But I went to Warsaw, and there in Warsaw they sorted it out for me. 'But this has nothing to do with the Church or anything, only that the song goes like this.' And, well, I got that approved by them. We performed in Warsaw, at the fifth anniversary of Cepelia.²⁷⁸ And then on, we appeared on the radio...

We manufactured jewellery boxes, various things, those folk ones, of wood. On the other hand, among other things, at my bindery, we started producing block jigsaws and various other things that are not folk art. They thus had us switched over from Cepelia to the Voivodeship Association of Workers' Cooperatives. And so our ensemble was transferred there. There were hairdressers too, among others. Why am I mentioning the hairdressers... For, as we were transferred there, then they came to the conclusion that the ensemble alone – this was a purely regional ensemble – then they'd join as well, as a choir, and we will be practising together. We practised together for a year, more than a year. There emerged, as it were... The origin of 'Lachy'. But they had us returned back to Cepelia, 'cause those products we made – there were clothes pins, etc. – having reconciled all that, they let us be back again with Cepelia. Therefore, we partly withdrew the ensemble. It danced with 'Lachy' but at the same time, with 'Twórczość'.²⁷⁹

The thing here is not to determine in detail in what ways and when exactly those artistic ensembles operated, when were the blocks or wooden jewellery boxes made, when the manufacture was done under the Cepelia brand and when it was

278 'Cepelia' was the abbreviation, and a popular trademark, commonly used for the Central Office of Folk Arts and Crafts; (since 1954, Association of Polish Cooperatives of Folk Arts and Crafts), an organisation founded in 1949 in Warsaw. Cepelia organises the work of Polish masters of decorative applied art, specialising mainly in the production of souvenirs, and arranges for the sale of these products.

279 As a fact of interest, let us remark that 'Twórczość' Folk Arts-and-Crafts Workers' Cooperative, existing till this day in Nowy Sącz, has a professional website, posting a.o. pieces of historical information and a catalogue of its manufactured products: www.tworczość.pl.

subject to another institution – and why, or why not, just this one. I am not in a position, nor do I even endeavour, to disentangle this intermingled knot of events – not on the level of facts.

Of real importance for me is my Interviewee's individual autobiographical memory, in which all these experiences, thus intermingled, occupy a critical place at the given stage of his life. He reports on them eagerly and with considerable emotional involvement. As he talks to me, he takes out photographs from various events that his ensemble took part in and shows me numerous wooden ornaments and utilitarian objects manufactured by his workshop, which he keeps at his home. His animation, and satisfaction illuminate these emotions related to his non-regular job:

That was a pleasure for me, that I could take for me a... // meet people. Besides, I can show you the pictures that are here, the letters I received from people... That made you pleased, that, // that you were doing something, anyway.

As it turns out, this activity was even more extensive, multidimensional and involved Zygmunt's personal development, enhanced qualifications, and additional education:

It was only in the late sixties that I was completing, // in the seventies. I did [my studies at] the Higher School of Film in Warsaw. ... I worked with 'Twórczość' then already, with our cooperative from here. This is a Cepelia cooperative. And I made films for them – the customs, folk arts, dances, and so on.

As this account nears its end, we learn more about his involvement and the unfulfilled opportunities it potentially offered:

I started making these films. They were interested. I created, like, a film club, 'Krajka' I named it. There are even press clippings. That was the thing I needed, I wanted to learn things. Well, they offered me, once I completed [my studies], that I go to the Andes to do the camerawork. But, well, I say I'm not going there, for I don't know how my health is, whether I can stand it in those mountains, staying there. That's for one thing. And on the other hand, I've got my family here, my wife, my kid, everything here. So what am I up to now, going there, making a year-long trip? 'Cause that journey was to last for a year, more or less. So I say, 'What for? You take an unmarried man with you.' ... I also had a proposal that I'd be paid a fee for each episode of the film, once it was done. I say, 'No. You'd be better paying me for running this club.'

All these threads can be interpreted in terms of a biographical process of creative and active adaptation to the existing conditions. Or, as looking for opportunities for personal development within the existing confines, determined, superimposed and controlled from above. To refer once again to the notions elaborated on the grounds of Fritz Schütze's analytic method, one may refer here to the interpenetration of a biographical action scheme and institutional patterns. One may, moreover, discern one further dimension in these (hi)stories: a trace of yet another redefinition of identity. Involvement in a folk ensemble, the manufacture of arts-and-crafts

products and, the making of documentary films (on the ensemble and handicrafts) have become central to his self-definition at this stage of the narrator's life.

The break marking the subsequent stage of Zygmunt Podhalański's life is his retirement in the mid-1970s. This is an important point in most autobiographies of former prisoners under analysis, usually marking one's entry into an 'eventless' period, where the individual's previous activities – primarily, professional activities – fade out and are replaced by new ones. For a change, family affairs, which had been there before too, but now fill a greater space of one's everyday experience, tend not to be willingly included in the stories so constructed. The narrative being analysed does not confirm these observations, or it does so by contrast – as an exception to the rule.

Our conversation, intermediated by the photographs, becomes reanimated at this point. The evocation of the recent experiences, from 1976 onwards, makes my Interviewee smile and show contentment. His memory produces images that are of essence for him, with their accompanying positive emotions. The photographs we are looking at support these images and emotions, which essentially focus around two main stories.

The first is about his involvement in the activities of the association of former prisoners as well as with another organisation dedicated to disabled war veterans. It must be remembered that Mr Podhalański was a member of the prisoners' association ever since it was formed – in fact, he established its branch in Nowy Sącz right after his return. But this first engagement was aborted for a number of years, or perhaps he ended it himself, to be resumed only in the mid-1970s, exactly at the time when most other former concentration camp inmates and a considerable number of war veterans also did so. The move they made became the condition for receiving specific privileges as veterans, whilst the politicisation seemed much less impudent then:

That did not last for too long [i.e. his engagement right after the war with the Association of Former Political Prisoners – PF's note], because the ZBoWiD was formed. They liquidated the Association, and I withdrew. I automatically got into ZBoWiD, 'cause this, in that, but... I stopped poking around in there, as this somehow didn't suit me. Besides, // not to mention that there I met the people with whom, well... Just between you and me, I met them in a different field as well. That was inconvenient for me. Besides, there was no time, for there were other things to do, rather than entertaining myself with it. Only after all those changes, this was the seventies, when I ... was retired, so I had a bit of time. They came to me. ... The chairmen were swapped. They asked me to join the verification committee, so I went to the verification committee and there, // to the board, here, of the former ZBoWiD. I started working here. And I was drafted in from there again, // again, my colleagues came over and say, 'Go to the ZIW²⁸⁰, 'cause they're quarrelling all the time, then you

280 Abbreviation for the Association of Disabled War Veterans, a social organisation whose members are disabled war veterans wounded or injured soldiers, widows/

shall settle the folks down.' And indeed, as I appeared there, then it somehow quietened down. And, actually, I've been Chairman ever since. I first chaired the club, and now I chair the branch. ... That's the seventies already... And so, I've actually been acting as such all the time. Now, I've withdrawn from the Polish Association, from my chairmanship. ... I don't know what's going to happen, as I'm chairman of the audit committee.

One of the reasons why Mr Podhalański is reluctant about his involvement in the activities of ZBoWiD at the time when this organisation was formed, in 1949 – apart from this centralised veteran organisation being strongly politicised, and dependent on the ruling communist party (PZPR) – was the fact that its members included some people he meets from time to time 'in a different field'. It is not difficult to guess that he means those who called him for interrogations, and carried out the interrogations. They were, namely, those 'better' veterans who marched under the 'appropriate' standard during the war. This is how their leftist devotion had been defined, in any case; hence, they were granted the power, be it locally, to summon the suspect veterans in order to interrogate them and drag them round the gaols. Once again, it becomes evident that localness and 'familiarness' are an important context for those interactions. The same actors are playing their different roles on different stages, which might lead to a confusion ("That was inconvenient for me."). How could one be sitting at a meeting beside a veteran colleague who has just ordered to have one detained, conducted one's interrogations, or inspected one's company and wickedly charged it with a surtax? Also, there are other consequences to these close and frequent face-to-face contacts involving these same people in completely different social interactions, which were critical for determining the partners' identities. One such effect is, arguably, the actors' lesser involvement in each of these interactions, their being less professional in what they were doing. Also visible is the conventionality of the whole performance, since everybody reciprocally debunks the roles they acted out via the other roles they play moments later. This perhaps makes the effects of this drama, quite crucially for this particular case, less severe or painful for those who have been assigned the worst of the roles: the persecuted, the interrogated, the gaoled. Whilst assuming this dramaturgical perspective, let us never forget that what we are talking about is real life.

Zygmunt explains his reluctance to commit to the ZBoWiD in different terms: "there was no time, for there were other things to do, rather than entertaining myself with it". Indeed, there were multiple issues he considered serious or important niggling at the back of his mind in the year 1949. Since he classed

widowers and orphans of fallen soldiers and deceased disabled war veterans. Established in 1919, the ZIW operated as an underground organisation during the Occupation, was reestablished in 1944, and then temporarily liquidated in the Stalinist period (1950–6).

this one as not so serious, a form of entertainment, it would not fit the remainder of the picture of himself in the period concerned. This situation definitely changes upon his retirement. This is, as we have said, a completely different stage in his biography. The distribution of time he now executes is different too, which implies a change in his personal priorities. What was deemed entertainment or loss of time, now becomes an important issue in Zygmunt's life – an essential element of his identity.

However, his activity with the veteran organisations, especially with the ZBoWiD, is shown as a duty imposed from the outside – even if it is evoked with emotional involvement, if not pride. Instead of another picture of the narrator making independent and daring decisions, we hear and read that his colleagues came and 'drafted him in'.

What is the reason for such a sudden alteration in the way the narrative of those experiences is constructed, and in the way they are interpreted – in the way he goes through them and adds an autobiographical meaning to them? What we now encounter is his susceptibility to the suggestions and instigations of others; drifting instead of steering. We find no independent decisions or choices of his own, no shaping of the course of events. Instead, there is the pressure of friendly obligations and an inertia of the institution into whose wheels he has fallen: since there are posts available, someone has to fill them, even though they may be reluctant to do so. Even the improved situation following his taking up the position of chairman of the local branch of the Association of Disabled War Veterans is shown as a parallel occurrence which merely happened at that time – as if spontaneously, without much connection with the narrator: "as I appeared there, then it somehow quietened down".

This alteration could be explained by the personal modesty of a man who is reluctant to make others aware of the positions he held, or what he acted as. Not because he considers such positions or functions dishonourable but because he sees nothing in them to boast about. There is no heroic adventure, no direct personal merit on his part. Moreover, joining the ZBoWiD and, simultaneously, its local authorities is in contrast to Zygmunt's earlier reluctance to become involved in this structure. Hence, it poses a certain problem to the narrator who has to merge into a single story the varying stages in his biography that do not seemingly fit together. However, he finds a way to make his autobiography stably coherent, and preserve the integrity of his self-image unspoiled. He eclipses and belittles his own involvement, emphasising instead the instigations of his colleagues, and using the quantifier 'former' with respect to the institution that existed and fared fairly well at that time: "They asked me to join the verification committee, so I went to the verification committee and there, // to the board, here, of the former ZBoWiD". To be sure, ZBoWiD was clearly not then yet 'former': a continually existing entity, it had recently been transformed and continued to exist for a further fourteen years. Yet, in spite of his commitment, my Interviewee does not want me to associate him with this name and the veteran organisation it denotes.

ZBoWiD ceased existing in 1990; its activities have been taken over by the organisation known as the Association of Veterans of the Republic of Poland and Former Political Prisoners. In parallel with it, there operates a Polish Association of Former Political Prisoners of Nazi Prisons and Concentration Camps, reactivated in 1990. The Association of Disabled War Veterans has functioned throughout as a separate entity. Zygmunt Podhalański is not bothered by his involvement and functions on the boards of all these institutions. Furthermore, he acts as a local representative of the Maximilian-Kolbe-Werk association. As it thus turns out again, signs and names tend to obfuscate the image of real social processes and interactions, rather than help us to understand them. Such multiplicity of commitments in the apparently competitive organisations, their interpenetration, is perhaps apparently astonishing. In fact, there is nothing out of the ordinary in this; in fact, this is quite a typical situation, particularly as regards the provincial structures of such organisations.

The rather uncertain tone my Interviewee uses when talking about his engagement with these veteran organisations could as well suggest that he is not quite willing to tell much about the positions he held and their related profits or benefits, as he believes it would be more practical not to boast excessively about it. But this seems to be a red herring: the interview over, Zygmunt searched for the addresses of his colleagues – former prisoners – and we looked together through various documents related to his work in those veteran organisations (some of which, electronically formatted, he showed me on his home PC). There were many documents – all arranged in an order, collated, captioned. Among them one finds, for instance, letters from the poorest families of former prisoners for whom it was necessary to organise financial assistance, Christmas parcels, etc. This office work was performed with great diligence and in a very reliable fashion. I had the impression that for my Interviewee, this work was an important service provided to the others; one of the major tasks at that stage of his biography.

But the retirement phase of Zygmunt Podhalański's life was not confined to his involvement in the prisoners' and veterans' milieus. It was also the time in which he could afford the previously impossible journeys he had planned from long ago. We were guided through them by the albums we looked at together and a carefully kept family chronicle – each volume representing a single year, containing photographs with descriptions and comments, documents, press clippings, tickets from excursions made or concerts attended. Again, extraordinary order was this chronicle's trait: each item had its dedicated place in the album, and each album its special place on the shelf.

For many years, travel abroad was formally blocked by the unavailability of passport. My Interviewee had mentioned this earlier, when announcing the main threads of the second part of his narrative, joking that he had received his passport when he was about to retire – his possible escape abroad perhaps save some public money. He is now more detailed in evoking that situation in response to my questions, which are inspired by the photographs we look at together. Asked

whether he was coaxed into joining the PZPR communist party in the period he was active with Cepelia, he responds:

Oh, and how many times was that! But there was one thing that I did – for I joined the Democratic Party. It was owing to this that I got, at all, a passport for People’s Democracy countries. In no way could I get a passport [before then]. In spite of my efforts. One colleague from ‘Twórczość’ says to me, ‘Oh how stupid you are. Join the Democratic Party, and you will get your passport without a problem. For you they’ll sort it out.’ And, indeed. I went there and I saw that all the lads [are] the same [there]. It’s the same notes that they’re playing. [*laughs*] So what’s the fuss. All right. I signed up. Literally, two months later, I got a silver cross of merit. For I worked here, in this, // the community [housing-estate] committee. I chaired the social conciliation board, so I had quite a lot of merits to my credit. It turns out that suddenly, they found one [i.e. a passport] for me.

The Democratic Party (Stronnictwo Demokratyczne; SD) was, along with the United Peasants’ Party (ZSL), one of the two satellite parties of the PZPR. It mainly operated in artisanal, mercantile and intelligentsia milieus. His accession to this organisation, in 1969, is constructed in my Interviewee’s autobiographical memory as a ‘join the pact’ move – an opportunistic, insincere, purely pragmatic act. There appears, let us remark, the narrative figure of a colleague who un.masks the rules of the game before the naive, ‘stupid’ protagonist. The colleague helps him see the truth and to realise that everyone (anyone who is of importance, given the context) has long been playing this game – and “it’s the same notes that they’re playing”. The last doubts are allayed and ethical defences are given an excuse: “So what’s the fuss. All right. I signed up”. There is more to it: the commitment can be interpreted today as a *sui generis* subversion of the socio-political system; if not demolishing it from the inside, then at least taking advantage of it and ridiculing it, although the actual incentive is purely private: it’s all about getting the passport.

No less important is one more ‘aside’ voice – of the same or some other colleague – reassuring that nothing wrong has happened, it’s all the same old way. You can even go to church as you did before. Joining the SD is contrasted with would-be involvement with the PZPR, the difference between the two organisations being emphasised. Moreover, commitment to either allows one to extricate oneself from repeated instigations to join the other, preventing such an option. The other party is, clearly, ‘the worse one’:

“Well, see what you’ve done? And now you’ve got it. Nothing’s changed, for you can go to church if you like, otherwise you wouldn’t.” As I was dragged to the party, then I said that forgive me, my dear ones, but I go to church and don’t want anyone to make a charge against me that I go to church being a party member. ‘We, to you... // You can keep going, we have nothing [against], you’ll believe it that...’ [The pronoun ‘you’ is used in plural in the original. (Transl. note)]. I say, ‘I was made a believer by my parents.’

The system is operational – another of ‘our men’ is awarded straight away for his work. Some merits were identified to his credit (from an earlier period, but it does not matter), for which State decorations are owed to him. The obstacles to giving him a passport have disappeared – but this right only extends to friendly countries; the trust toward an SD cardholder is thus limited and so confined. The passport was, in any case, the actual purpose behind this whole masquerade. At last, the daydreams of travelling can come true:

I travelled a lot, the moment I managed to get abroad. As I got a permit for my first trip, well, then the first trip I made, was an excursion I made to Bulgaria. Such were the... I purchased ... that excursion. I came back. To see around what all that looked like. There were many things I didn't quite like. 'Cause, such blasted traffic... That, that was not for me. I first had a motorbike, then I bought a car. By car, as we started travelling, then we had the whole, with my wife, our granddaughters, // then we had gone all around Europe.

We regrettably only have a reminiscence of the first of these numerous trips – and, a completely failed one, which failed to meet the tourist's expectations, evoking instead the climate of ‘trading excursions’ to the ‘brotherly countries’, which were so popular at that time. The other journeys have not been reported here, and were not part of the recorded account. The recording only contains the rustling pages of the family chronicle I am shown. There are photographs taken on each of those trips, descriptions and notes about the places he visited. Including the Mauthausen Museum and Memorial, a stop along the route of one such family trip, made once the travellers could at last go somewhat westwards.

I was in Mauthausen twice. ... By the way, I once kicked up a row that there were no Polish inscriptions. There were more Poles than any other nation, mind you. I don't know, I didn't pay attention later if they had rectified that or not.

This particular trip was of special importance: the Mauthausen camp is a very important point in the map of Zygmunt Podhalański's life experiences. This was a journey of key importance for his self-definition, his individual identity. But not just the individual identity: by taking his family there, he gives a sign that he desires a family-based, intergenerational transmission of memory of those experiences. His arguing for a commemorative plaque in Polish is an act in the sphere of collective, national memory. A few decades after the war, the space of the former camp does not remain indifferent; hence, its transformations trigger such strong emotions, if they let down the expectations. This is comprehensible, and quite characteristic to a majority of former inmates – particularly those involved in the official rituals of commemoration, as activists with prisoner/veteran organisations.

Although it is not the last image evoked in our conversation, the trip to Mauthausen is the ‘youngest’, regarding the chronology of the events reported on. The final minutes of the Zygmunt Podhalański interview appear not to be leading, otherwise a usual thing, to a summation or tagline; no afterthought is given, or

expressed, to the autobiographical account just concluded; not a single sentence of a general commentary is uttered with respect to it.

Our talk has been revolving around the photos and albums for quite a while now, but Zygmunt is growing more and more impatient. He cannot focus on my questions anymore, or even on the photographs he is showing me. He keeps looking for more and more of them. He walks to the next room, brings more material in, but does not give himself (or me) enough time to focus on them.

Extended stories have now been replaced by short, slogan-like commentaries; together with the photographs, they unveil the new experiences of my Interviewee, completely absent hitherto – particularly those dating back to the most remote, pre-camp stages of his biography. These unveiled episodes show how incomplete is the autobiographical story from the first part of this account. This is not a disadvantage: any narration is incomplete, as it would not map one's life on a 1:1 scale (otherwise, an autobiographical memory would be thus imaged), but rather, construct it. It is a rare thing, though, for us to have the opportunity to see such deficiencies, gaps, empty spaces, and to try and complement them with the use of photographs and comments on them.

Now we can learn more about Zygmunt's parents, sisters, and their wartime hardships:

One [sister] got beaten by the Germans, and died after the war. The other one died two years ago. She rode a bike [one day], when a child, and a German lashed her on the back with a staff, that instead of stopping, as she was going, and bowing, she carried on. So he beat her for that. He punched her in the kidney. She continually had problems with her kidneys [afterwards] and died in the end. There was no dialysis at that time yet. My uncle, my grandmother's brother, was also shot dead by the Germans.

But first of all, the narrator has grown more distinctive now. Also by means of curious details, such as the fact that Zygmunt's official, registered date of birth is different from the real one, since the vicar, also an uncle, had the date 'rewritten in January'. An essential fact for the interpretation of his later biographical experiences is his involvement with Marian Sodality, and even more so, with scouting. Now, we can better understand our Interviewee's pre-war patriotism and his later involvement in the conspiracy, which, rather than being based on his personal political preferences, stemmed from how his own parents understood Polishness, or things Polish:

Let me tell you something. All of them [= my family members] were Poles. That's what they imbued me with, in the first place. But I'd rather be careful to say, this is the *endecja* [i.e. National Democracy followers]. 'Cause this one was an *endek* [i.e. national democrat/ND follower] [*pointing to a man in the picture*] but this one would rather have backed Piłsudski. And this is a photo of me, from the Sodality.

No less important for the image of Zygmunt's socialisation is his reminiscence of the methods his parents applied to control the children:

You've asked me about my parents. Our parents loved us very much. They would never give me a beating, somehow, or something of the sort. But, when you were up to mischief, then you'd get nearly an hour and a half of a chat, that how do you love us, how you could do such a thing. I'd prefer to get a thrashing a thousand times than listen to that, how could you do it that way... 'You cannot understand how much we have to do for you, and you're paying us back in such a way!'

However, an upbringing based upon a sense of guilt was just one of the methods – possibly, a not-too-efficient one, as it is reported as part of a childhood anecdote. The other educational method proved much more efficient:

The comfort I had was awfully comfortable [*sic*], for, once the holiday came, my father would give me sixty zloty – one zloty per day – and say, 'Dispose of it as you will!' Then I, well, went on tour around Poland. ... I would visit various cities, spending my nights at some barns. I'd return to Lublin region, where my uncle was a forester. There, I took a canoe, or perhaps a horse, and travelled further up. I saw all those forests, there, the lakes, and so on, one after another. I paid visits to everybody. Then, I was back, and still worked at the harvest. I earned my money during the harvest. You could always have your five [zloty], quite often, earned doing the work. Beside this, I got 50 grosz per each jackdaw, hooded-crow shot. And, one-and-a-half zloty for a hawk. That you would return to the forestry management, there they dispensed the money. And I returned, with one hundred and twenty zloty on me. And that was my vacation. ... And that's why I'm saying, there's nothing that's a trouble for me.

Zygmunt's father endeavoured to develop his son's technical skills in a similar way:

It all was interrelated somehow... They wouldn't give me any toys, for that matter. Toys, there was no dice. But indeed, I could get a ball, pincers, if I needed them. What I needed, then, 'Make it.' But not, like, they'd buy me the stuff, so I play with it a little and turf it out. I had to make it to have it; I had to make an effort to get it. ... As I told you, I made myself a radio. One radio set, another one. Then, I was taught that you shouldn't take anything on credit. And I never took anything on credit. Because I was instructed in what the outcome of taking on credit is.

How efficient these socialisation methods have proved is testified to by the earlier Occupation and camp narrative, which we know quite well now. Now, as we look through the photographs, new threads are added to the pre-war and wartime (hi) stories – such as, for example, the banned but rather delightful engagement with a music ensemble, and 'green' or 'white school' outings.

We made up a group of four, like. Only it was bloody risky. Should our teachers, professors have known, we wouldn't have spent but a second in our *gimnazjum* [i.e. junior high school]. But, you did sing a little, in this way. When we were, for example, in Zwardoń, 'cause we had such a period that we would go, for instance, to Zwardoń²⁸¹

281 A village and winter resort in the southernmost part of Poland.

for a month. There, you went skiing and attended your lessons. That was, like, a relaxation, as it were, and learning at the same time. ... Well, and then, we would slip by and sang in a club for cash, as masked boys. ... No one knew about it. Nobody would even grass on us. There were many such sorties.

Mr Podhalański considers his employment with a trade company during the Occupation to have been one more method in his socialisation:

As I was back here after September [1939], it was already in January [1940] that a fellow from Warsaw arrived and offered me a job as a representative of the ‘Dobrolin’ factory....

His compulsory fire brigade service also falls into this category, along with coerced labour in the Construction Service – *Baudienst*, repeated hiding from arrest – for the first time as early as the beginning of 1940, in the course of the *AB-Aktion*. Illegal sorties to the mountains, with skis, which were then a ‘banned’ facility:

We had to hand the skis over ... once the war with Russia [i.e. the USSR] broke out. All the skis had to be returned. So, I returned a pair of tacky ones, and hid a pair of good ones at my colleague’s in [the village of] Rytro. We used to go there. And then, we went up the mountains, ‘cause there were no ski lifts like there are today – besides, what pleasure is it, to go up on a lift – and we hiked through the mountains. Then, we returned, and had our skis hidden in Rytro.

There are other photographs and little stories too, parallel to these ones as they are set in exactly the same wartime period. Not as swift or full of suspense, they are more thoughtful and tougher to express – like the story of his first love:

I can specifically remember that excursion [*looks at the photographs*]: she was my first love. She is dead, regrettably, she perished... died of a cancer.

Or, the one about the consequences of his wife’s wartime experiences:

I only had a son. My wife could not have more children, as she had had those experiments made on her, and the effect was that, afterwards...

These last utterances do not fit this autobiography too well. They were veiled in the unrestrained narrative. They have surfaced now, induced by the photographs; yet, Zygmunt is not willing to ponder for a while over them. These are hard, perhaps the toughest experiences, which he has not managed to integrate with the remainder of his biography. They are at odds with the leading statement of his meta-story: “I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth”, which is meant to interpret and add meaning to this Interviewee’s life experiences. This sentence has alternately been an overt or hidden motto of the free-flowing narrative. It also accompanied a number of little stories or anecdotes chaotically scattered across the last section of this interview (the last-quoted sentence was stated as part of one such story). All of them together build up an adventurous autobiography, a picaresque, Good Soldier Švejk style story of the protagonist’s fortunes. Those willing to identify more literary analogies could find hints of knightly epic, a philosophical tale...

In turn, a number of other micro-stories appearing in this conversation strongly contradict this pattern. Both types of anecdote, even if pushed aside (to the story's end), shed light on the processes of autobiographical construction – on the memory level as well as on the narrative level. Such 'scraps' enable us to better understand the wholes from which they have been cut and rejected; these wholes are not so much literary as, so to put it, identity-related constructions.

Zygmunt Podhalański's 'light' story on his experiences, particularly his concentration camp experiences, is a means of distancing himself from them and coping with them; of making himself part of the image, as an element of identity. This task, compulsory as it is, does not appear easy to deliver, if it is completely deliverable at all. Even if this narrative, when read superficially, appears light or easy, it turns out that not all the pieces of the experience have been successfully integrated within it. Some of them, perhaps the most important ones, remain veiled, temporarily covered, rather than worded or expressed. The temporariness is, in this case, not about a transient or unsteady quality; the thing is, the cover he uses is not perfectly tight. Hence, to escape from being confronted with what is hidden beneath this cover becomes the hidden engine of the activities of this man's daily life. Such and escape cannot be inhibited; otherwise, the thoughts could turn in a dangerous direction – towards experiences he has no strength to confront.

Let me tell you something. The best thing is not to think. Be engaged in something else instead. One ought to get on and do some other things.

The account of Zygmunt Podhalański was concluded with an important epilogue. There is no definite punch line to it, for a change. There is no clear ending, the moment the recording equipment is switched off being – more than usual – the researcher's (that is, my own) arbitrary decision. The interaction becomes chaotic to the extent that it makes its meanings comprehensible. My Interviewee has stopped responding to the questions, or commenting on the photographs he shows me. He is tired and affected now, if not tense – he would not allow himself to pause. He keeps on looking for more photos, documents. He takes a display cabinet down from the wall with awards and distinctions, shows me them with satisfaction, or even with pride, naming them one by one ("This is the Commodore's [Cross]. This is the Knight's, the Officer's, the Partisan [Cross]."). So, maybe the game he played with the system in the period of the People's Poland (most of these orders and decorations come from that time) was not just a cynical and pragmatic calculation?

As for me, I am no longer able to keep up with browsing everything that he puts on the table, especially since these things need to be removed quickly to make space for the next (and next) pictures, documents, diplomas, or objects. I would rather help him put these things in order and put each piece away in its proper, precisely assigned place, thus helping to bring our meeting to an end. This is

partly successful: we close this interaction and make an appointment for the next meeting. The foothold is the pictures and documents we have not managed to see and photograph. There is also a collection of audio cassettes with accounts that he had recorded many years earlier with his colleagues in the War Veterans Association. He has been thinking for some time now about a reliable place where he could entrust this collection, for its digitisation and archiving. He responds enthusiastically to my declaration that the KARTA Centre would be interested in such a collection. We agree to meet again some time in the near future, without fixing the date. Zygmunt will prepare the recordings (he keeps them at his office, not at home), make a selection and rerecord for me fragments of his own memoirs that he once wrote down; he would not offer me the entire thing, as he deems it 'too private'.

I look for an opportunity to visit Nowy Sącz, and to meet Zygmunt there again. Three weeks later, I come across an unexpected opportunity to go to Zakopane and to record another interview there; on my way back, I will be sure to visit 'my man from Sącz'. We exchange email messages beforehand ("I've been working with a computer for, maybe, four or five years. ... I have learned the skill on my own"), concretising our plan. Zygmunt is very satisfied with my offer to visit him again so soon. He offers to put me up for the night at his place, should I need it an overnight stop on my way back to Warsaw. In conclusion, we decide that we shall see what happens, as I cannot tell exactly how long my meeting in Zakopane will last and what time I will return.

On 5th March 2006, late in the afternoon, we meet again in the attic apartment of the house he had once built himself. My Interviewee was prepared for this meeting even more intensely than for the previous one. This is something that really matters for him. He wears an elegant shirt and a tie, and a pullover on top – the weather outside is extremely unpleasant on that day: gloomy, cold, wet, and windy. A supper he has carefully prepared is waiting on the table. The tableware is prepared for both of us, but I end up eating on my own – he declines to join in, excusing himself as having no desire for food. Seated together at the table, we are finally talking – but no follow-up of the interview from a few weeks ago develops. I can see that Zygmunt is not willing to resume that story, deeming it completed and concluded. I do not even try to press him, feeling that the moment is not quite right for restarting those reminiscences. I am afraid of the ambience of edginess and chaos that we experienced at the end of our previous meeting; now, I can see some anxiety and tension.

My Interviewee expected that I would spend the night at his house before I continued my trip to Warsaw. He asks me which room I would like to sleep in, and what I would like to sleep on. But I feel up to continuing my drive before the day ends, which he seems a little disappointed with, but makes no attempt to influence my decision. He recalls, with a smile, images of his own adventurous nocturnal motorbike trips between Nowy Sącz and Warsaw, which he made over thirty years ago on a regular basis.

Supper over, he hands me two big wooden Cepelia-made boxes, embellished with incrustations, manufactured by the cooperative he once worked for. Not as a gift for me, though, but as an elegant packaging for the cassettes containing recordings of the memories of his colleagues, veterans and disabled soldiers. The moment Mr Podhalański hands me this collection over is extremely important for him, the climax of our meeting. He really cares that these recordings are digitised and placed in the archive. The original copies are to be returned to Nowy Sącz.

We do not reenter a camp story, staying outside of it. But my host's camp experience remains the point of reference for this second meeting as well. We seat ourselves at the computer, and I am given a CD with a copy of a fragment of his memories. I give Zygmunt a CD-formatted audio recording of his account from three weeks ago. He mentions again the former camp prisoners living locally whom he deems worth visiting in order to record them while they are still alive and able to share their recollections.

It is getting late, and I am facing a long journey – and a rather tough one, given the weather conditions. Satisfied with the meeting, we cordially shake hands and say farewell. Actually, his handgrip is strong enough for me to wonder how come this old man is still so sturdy. At last, I depart. I reach Warsaw before midnight. The following day, before noon, I call Nowy Sącz to tell him I returned safe and sound, and to thank him once again. I know that Zygmunt Podhalański is especially eager to hear the former piece of news, as he was worried about my journey. Someone else takes the call, so I ask if I could please talk to Zygmunt.

Unfortunately, I could not. Our conversation the previous night was the last one he was to have in his life.

He had died that night, in his sleep.

III. Roman Strój

Roman Strój was born on 13th April 1929 in Kozielec, Pomeranian Province (Voivodeship). Since his early childhood, he lived in Warsaw – his parents had moved there in search of employment opportunities. Before the war and during the Occupation, he attended an elementary school. Shortly before the Warsaw Uprising, he got involved in conspiratorial activities. Arrested just after the Uprising broke out, he was deported, together with a mass of civilians, to the transit camp in Pruszków near Warsaw, then was transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau and subsequently, in September 1944, to Mauthausen (camp no.: 103151). In November, he was sent to one of the subcamps in the Vienna peripheral area, and worked there at the local armaments factories (Wien-Schwechat). In April 1945, he returned, in a death march, to Mauthausen. After the liberation, he was cured in several hospitals in Germany, and stayed for some time in transit camps for former prisoners and coerced labourers in Regensburg and Wetzlar. He was back in his home country in 1946. Roman completed his secondary education then. He subsequently worked in several public institutions, as a clerical worker, until 1980, and retired thereafter. Roman Strój lived in Warsaw, and was member of the local club of former prisoners of the Mauthausen concentration camp.

I visually encountered Mr Strój from time to time when attending the meetings of the Warsaw club of former Mauthausen inmates. He attended these meetings frequently, of not on a regular basis – but was not particularly active there, in contrast to many of his colleagues: he would be seated somewhere at the back, not ever taking the floor. Our first, and short, chat took place as we once incidentally met at the Powązki Cemetery (so-called Military Cemetery) in Warsaw, in April 2002. It was then that we made an initial appointment, to meet and talk, and get the conversation recorded. Then, we stayed in touch on the phone, refixed the meeting date several times, to eventually meet on 31st July 2002.

We were both prepared for an interview situation – obviously, each of us in his peculiar way. I had had a few recording sessions of this sort to my credit. Roman could only get prepared based on how he figured out such an interview – he had never produced such an account (and had never been interviewed). He had not wrote down his memoirs, either. This was one of the major reasons for why I wanted to meet him in person and get his biographical story recorded. Although it is much easier to get access to those who many a time told their story or wrote memoirs, oral history projects – including the one on former Mauthausen inmates – are meant, as I emphasised earlier, to give the voice to those who have rather rarely, if ever, made themselves heard. Biographically oriented sociology is familiar with this incentive, too.

It befits to say now that the lack of narrative skills in my Interlocutor drew my attention when I decided to choose when I had to select one interview among the

many interviews on Warsaw/Warsaw Uprising available, in order to pay a particularly close look at it.

The transition, or rather, leap from an ordinary or typical daily interaction to the central point of our meeting: the out-of-the-ordinary situation of creation/recording an autobiographical story did not take us a lot of time. The earlier phone talk anticipating this interview eliminated the need for me to explain my interest and presence once again, or the very idea behind the documentation project we were participating in together. There was no one else in his apartment, which made the focus easier. Shortly afterwards, we saw ourselves seated at the table; on switching on my recording equipment, I expressed my routine request for the man to identify himself and say his date of birth:

Well, then. My name's Roman Strój, born 13th April 1929 in the locality of Kozielec, the former Pomeranian Voivodeship. Well, that's what is now Bydgoszcz [Voivodeship], or... And, what's upstill...

There is nothing to add at this point (but indeed could be: many individuals started their unrestrained biographical narration from this point onwards): there is even more than just the first name, surname and DOB. There is a significant location – significant not in terms of its being, merely, the place of his birth, but of a meaning as this autobiography unfold. Also, in the context of the interactive situation we are within: we are meeting each other in the inner centre of Warsaw, I have arrived to record an account with a Warsaw resident and 1944 Uprising participant, former prisoner once taken to a camp in a Warsaw transport, and member of the local former Mauthausen inmates' milieu. Given such circumstances, the name of 'Kozielec', once evoked, signifies some very distant, rather vaguely defined place, somewhere in the pre-war Pomeranian Province, today's Bydgoszcz region. In fact, the Voivodeship of Bydgoszcz ceased to exist; hence, Province of Kuyavia-and-Pomerania is what Roman should have had in mind.²⁸²

But why to focus so strongly on Roman Strój's place of birth, if the man belittles it? Well, just because of this. There is no coincidence in the fact that the name of his family locality only appears once throughout the interview, as part of the self-introduction, alongside the other basic personal details – as if read out from an ID, although he utters it from memory. Not from the memory of his experience but from the memory of information: he is aware he was born in Kozielec. Kozielec, however, has remained an undomesticated place, one that does not belong to the narrator. Warsaw is his 'right' place, although he makes no such direct statement. The thing is that traces of this city will (re)appear at multiple moments as this narrative unfolds.²⁸³

282 Kozielec is a village of 130 inhabitants, situated on the bank of the Vistula, in the Bydgoszcz County [*powiat*], Commune [*gmina*] of Dobrcz.

283 Such direct declarations tend to often be made in the stories told by former prisoners of this group. One Mauthausen club fellow thus expresses his symbiosis with the

The passage from the introduction to a free biographical story is preceded by me asking him to tell a story of his life.

As I said, I was born, // so, my father, a farmer by background, was in Warsaw from some point, but that though extortion, in fact, well, a life situation, because he was jobless. And well, he sought a place for himself in Warsaw, and he found one [laughs], he found one, let's say, // the thing is that my elder siblings, the brother and the sisters, took, such a, casual work. And well, it began, // it began with taking a residence in Marymont [district] in Warsaw, the year was, I think, nineteen, nineteen thirty, somewhere around, so to be right exact. And well, that whole life career of mine started, which means, from my childhood, there, to the kindergarten, when in the kindergarten, the years were, say, thirty-five already, thirty-six, nineteen-. Well, and the primary school in Marymont, in Kolektorska Street, there I completed, I should think, one grade. Later on, in Gostyńska Street, that was in Wola [district], I should think, Gostyńska. And after completion of these few grades, the war broke out ... and we moved to Kolo [area], in Obozowa Street. And there, in Obozowa Street, I entered, with my mates from that block-of-flats, as there, such a, 'Stefan Żeromski' workers' housing estate, in Obozowa it is. And there, in block nineteen, my mates, aged fourteen, fifteen, and so on, formed, like, an organisation, well, an AK [Home-Army] one. A sergeant or warrant officer came to us, a WO it was in fact, an elderly man. And he ran those classes with us, in the event of a rising. That was not yet a rising, then; that's still before the rising. And I attended [there]. In fact, my brother lived, my blood brother lived in, in Boer- [i.e. Boernerowo, an area in Warsaw], // in Kolo, and I still lived at that time in Marymont. And from Marymont did I come to my mates from that block-of-flats, for I also lived there, a bit. Once, a little in here, then, a little in there. And finally, before the very Uprising, there was, like, a situation that our organisation, that one, got divided: some went to the AL [= People's Army] while the others remained with the AK. I remained with the AK.

The beginning of this autobiography goes beyond the author's personal experience. His knowledge of what, and why, had happened before he was born and in the first unmemorable years of his life forms an integral part of his own story. These pieces of knowledge have a status equal to his own experience, and is integrated with this experience to the extent rendering it undeterminable at which point the 'actual'

town in the opening fragment of his own story: "My name is Nowicki, Henryk, an old Varsovian, you know. Whatever was connected in the Occupation with Warsaw, concerned by family. Till the very end, up until the camp's liberation and the return to Warsaw. And well, later on, it was all just Warsaw all the time, you know, and nowhere else. ... Hence, all that was connected with Warsaw, you know, was connected with me, and from the moment I was born, which was the year twenty-nine, I mean, 1920. My parents [were] also from Warsaw, and my grandparents too, you know."; account of Henryk Nowicki, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_018.

knowledge ends and the experience begins. Finding the demarcation line seems not quite necessary, as both areas form part of the Interviewee's identity, and of his self-image.²⁸⁴ This identity has from the very outset had elements determining the financial situation of his family, which was, to make it clear straight away, very poor. Roman's coming into the world in 1929, the year marked by the beginning of the great economic depression, which took an extremely severe course in Poland, must have additionally deteriorated that situation. Poverty incited Roman's parents to make a daring decision to leave for Warsaw and to look for earning opportunities there. The hope for making their situation improved must have been really big: they set off for the capital city with a baby aged 12 months plus four elder kids but without any specific profession which could have facilitated the search or make it more focused. Part of this interiorised family history is the earned work done by his elder brothers and sisters who had to contribute to supporting their family.

Roman's first childhood images based on his experience (which is lived through consciously as his own) are infixed in the topography of the poor workers' districts of Warsaw: the streets named Kolektorska, Gostyńska, Obozowa, evoked in order to define the spatial framework of Interviewee's spatial world, in the first place. He moved from one address, and school, to the other, remaining throughout within a single milieu, the universe of the workers' area of Wola: the mates from the block-of-flats, the 'Stefan Żeromski' workers' housing estate.²⁸⁵ This is where Roman

284 Yet, the vagueness of this borderline tends to be problematised and subject to afterthought within autobiographies: "I cannot really remember my earliest childhood, that is, the infantile period and the first years of my life, and have to omit them". Such a declaration does not imply, however, that the narrator has completely neglected those earliest years: "What I only know is that my father ...": cf. account of Michał Fertak, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_019 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

285 The universe of the workers' district of Wola in its pre-war shape is well pictured by Jerzy S. Majewski in his article 'Obozowa' (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 25th June 2004). Along with several expressive images of the daily life in the said housing estate, the following fragment of Franciszek Lewicki's essay (from a 1938 issue of 'Wiadomości Literackie' weekly) is quoted there: "At the inlet of Obozowa St., nothing has changed in the last fifty years. The tram stops and goes ahead amidst the same fences and hovels, plunges underneath the railroad trestle behind which, according to the plan, a network of Slavonic streets is meant to begin; it subsequently stops and gets emptied out suddenly. End of the line? I get off following the others, but the tram goes further up. I have stayed in the middle of some unknown broad street. A beautiful lawn, rows of grand and bright blocks-of-flats are fringing on both sides. There are twenty of them. They stand in a long line, their sides turned toward the street, separated by gardens, glistening in the sunshine with the panes of their enormous windows. The inscription on the first floor reads, "Stefan Żeromski' workers' housing estate"."

Strój's 'life career' started, to use his own self-ironic term – probably, the most apt one, as he is the best-versed expert in this career.

The outbreak of the war is just mentioned by Roman in passing, and, really, for the record, rather than to evoke any specific images from September 1939 or the city under Occupation thereafter. The moment the war enters is no clear biographical caesura. The Warsaw Uprising and its biographical consequences did produce such caesura, for a change. The few sentences expressed so far in this narration have been just a sketch, drawn with a very thick line but quite an essential one as it forms an important introduction to the autobiographical stories constructed as the narrator goes on. These introductory remarks tell us something important about the narrator's childhood years. As he recollects it, this period takes place in the streets of Wola area, featuring interactions with his backyard mates. The passages from one stage to the other are smooth, there is nothing changed because of the war – apart, perhaps, from the fact that the forms of entertainment get somewhat severer, getting congested into a conspiratorial adventure. A group of mates aged fourteen to fifteen are forming "an organisation, well, an AK one"; some elderly man, a sergeant, comes up; the boys are getting trained in the activities preparing them for a rising. As the situation evolves, the friends split into two groups at some point – some are joining the AL and the others, the AK. The story on this whole situation is told in the way as if the choice of either option had been completely independent on them – it looks as if they are splitting into two backyard football teams by tossing a coin or counting down²⁸⁶, though it will be made clear a moment later than some of those boys had had their preferences defined. All this takes place shortly before the Uprising.

As the Uprising breaks out (or, to be more specific, just before that moment), the short prologue of this story ends. The narrative gets denser; concrete and expressive images are evoked:

Well, and the story is that the day of rising is coming, I'm taking part in day one of the rising with such a very nice colleague, he's dead now, he was killed in the Warsaw Rising in the Old Town, Jurek Borkowski [was his name]. And, with this Jurek Borkowski... Aha, Jurek Borkowski says, 'Roman (for my name's Roman), Roman, I'm

286 One of my Interlocutors (born 1921, and thus a lot older and more mature, aware of the political contexts of the time), also imprisoned at a camp during the Uprising, member of the People's Guard (GL) and then, People's Army (AL), says of his own involvement: "Cause I was leftist of belief, still before the war, sir. This is what my contacts were like, my colleagues, and so it was. Should I have had colleagues from a different political orientation, then I would've sure be sitting [i.e. be member of] the AK [Home Army]. Everybody was doing something, clinging to the first contacts they had, and were doing something. After all, sir, that's a... // Today, we're all so wise. But you had to have your life lived."; account of Zbigniew Dhubak, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_156.

going with those lads of the AL, as they've got the arms, this or that, and the AK-men don't have all that at close hand.' At that time, still before. Well, and I remained with those mates....

Aha, that first day, that first day of August, I took part in the displacement of the ammunition, from Śródmieście [the downtown area] to Bema Street in Wola. And there, the situation was that you could even get killed there, in fact, as the gendarmerie were already fleeing, the barracks were already getting dismantled, and we were crossing that street, this is the street where presently there is that depot in Wola, I don't know what its name is. And we were so extremely lucky, and we were going with that WO, he led us. And we had that ammunition, with this Jurek Borkowski. ... And the father of this Jurek Borkowski was a tram driver. And it just happens that we're going together with that father, and the father doesn't know what it is that we're carrying. He doesn't know if Jurek is even in that... And, the coincidence was that we got off, he went further on, that father, well, and we had to carry that ammunition [to] there, in Bema St. Well, and we're going back to Koło, for there was our muster point, so to put it....

As we arrived in Bema St. with this ammunition, then they gave us the rifles, those English automates, the Sten guns, wrapped, there, in, sort of, envelopes emptied of cement. For us to carry those to Koło, to Obozowa Street, that in an old building, in '2', if I'm not mistaken. And, we carried that there, with this Jurek man. And now please have a look, we're carrying this, and at that time the lads had gone to their labour already, that is, to do the action. There, some dates were changed a bit, in any case, as we were back in the afternoon, on the first of August, those were not there anymore. And we only gave that arms back, those Stens. And the one who was receiving those Stens from us says, as we're asking him, 'What's going to happen with us?' – 'The action is done with today, but what's next?' – 'About what's next', he says, 'there's nobody, all have gone, if we need you for a coming action...' And it's August the first. And after he made the, how to say it, statement, we returned to the place of our stay, which is to our block, to Obozowa Street. And so it happened. Later on, the Ukrainians came. ... And we, whoever could, escaped to Boernerowo. There were the allotments, that's the housing estate of those our men. And, what turns out of it? And there, the Ukrainians were everywhere, in Warsaw already, and already, you know... The rising was on then, wasn't it? It already was the second, third, fourth [of August]... Well, and I don't really know what date it was, but in any case, we got through to Boernerowo, together with my brother. To that housing estate, of these officers' houses. ... And there, in the meantime, SS troops, the communications, had appeared. And those communications troops are doing their job, well, but we're hanging around there. There was something they apparently didn't like, as all the young ones, separately, they wouldn't any more ask if you lived in Boernerowo or not [in] Boernerowo, or you're from Warsaw [*unclear*].

It is not easy to put these images in an order; it is even harder to refer them, in some way, to the course of the Uprising actions. Instead, let us only record what can easily escape our attention in the swift current of this recollection. Namely, the

whole action of redeployment of ammunition was carried out together with a colleague who earlier on had gone “with those lads of the AL, as they’ve got the arms, this-that, and the AK-men did not have all that at close hand”. Also, let us not omit the fact that the action was not part of the Uprising – the Warsaw Uprising broke out a few hours later, while Roman Strój was back at his place, in one of those workers’ blocks-of-flats in Obozowa St. Once the Uprising was on, he had to get out of the trouble by fleeing from the Ukrainian troops supporting the Germans. My Interlocutor, together with his elder brother, chose the way, seemingly certain for them, leading to the recesses of the city they knew very well: to the garden plots and subdivision in the area of Boernerowo. This hasty choice of the escape direction appeared to be erroneous – they encountered German troops there.

I am taking a closer look at this episode not in order to expose the unreadiness, lack of coordination or irresponsibility of the commanders who resolved that a rising should break out (at the indicated moment). There is a lot of much more dramatic and, simultaneously, grotesque testimonies reinforcing such perception. There is also a lot of contrary reasons, supported by other testimonies. Both options endorse the views of either party to the unsolvable dispute about whether the incitement of the Warsaw Uprising was reasonable. Instead of joining either of the disputant groups, I prefer to focus on Roman Strój’s voice and the words he utters: my purpose is to get, through these words, together with Interviewee, a closer insight into his experiences from that time.

Seemingly, the shared element of these approaches is lostness, bewilderment, and relying on the others – no less confused and lost. There are the colleagues, asking “What’s next?”, and the commander knowing no answer but concluding the action for the day, as the dates have been altered, and therefore sending his subordinate fourteen/fifteen-year-olds back home. All this is happening moments before the ‘W’ Hour: fear, hiding, failed escape... This whole episode lacks a faintest trace of his own decision, or steps made by himself. Instead, proposed is a collective experience of chaos, obedience to orders inadequate to the situation, escaping the enemy – directly into their hands... The world around suddenly changes its prior meanings, and ceases being recognisable for the narrator. The streets of his town, with which he has been familiarising himself since his early childhood, are turning into traps. “What’s up” becomes uncertain: a trajectory experience enters the stage.

They caught us, and transported us to [the area of] Włochy near Warsaw, and from Włochy to Pruszków, to that camp, so to put it... That was the camp, in Pruszków, that was the trans-.... // What’s it called? From that camp, in Pruszków, they were dispatched to those various, to Auschwitz and to those [other] camps, and to the countryside too, to Polish villages. That varied. And, to Germany. As for myself, with that youth, so to put it, it is already recorded, in there, on August 13th we arrived in Auschwitz. There, we were for a rather short time, two weeks, I should think. In Auschwitz. And, from Auschwitz we were transported ... to the central Mauthausen camp. And this date is noted down as well. And, what’s after? We’ve been for a longer time in the camp, as that has been, say, from August on. There you’ve got it, it’s

there, some day August, you'd have to check up. We're staying at the central camp of Mauthausen till November. At the quarantine unit, // in block sixteen, on quarantine. And, well, we're busy with the camp labours, whatever the SS-men dictated for us to do then. That is, carrying stones from the quarries, and carrying them on [i.e. into] the central camp, inside. For there, it occurs that they were continually doing something. Those walls were they putting up, in various planes, and we were carrying those stones. I did not watch it minutely in what a, for what they were using those stones. In any case, the wall around Mauthausen was clad with these stones, it was of the height, roughly, three and a half, well, three metres for sure. And later on, this barbed wire with current. And we were carrying those stones. Whoever survived then, he'd lived to have what I had, that they selected those young ones and formed the so-called *Arbeitskommando*, and a *Jungkommando* of the young ones.

Like most of those who were not killed in the fighting (or manslaughters) during the Uprising but were caught by the Germans instead, Roman was taken, as a civilian, to the transit camp in Pruszków near Warsaw, and from that place, to the concentration camps of Auschwitz and, afterwards, Mauthausen. This fragment of the account tells us no details – whether with respect to the conditions in the Pruszków camp or with respect to the transport to the *kacet*, or regarding Auschwitz or Mauthausen as such. We can only hear mentions of the few main points of the way he then made – no zoom-ins, no images. The author/narrator sees himself as part of the collectivity – chased away, transported, kept at the camp, on the quarantine, etc. This recollection is completely deprived of an individual dimension of the experience – be it suffering or fear. The group of people he is part of forms no community: it is, instead, a mass of passive people, completely dependent on instructions and orders: “we arrived in ...”, “we were transported”, “we're busy with the camp labours, whatever the SS-men dictated for us to do then”, “we were carrying those stones”, “they ... formed the so-called *Arbeitskommando*, and a *Jungkommando* of the young ones”. There is no breach made, no close-up on himself, or anyone else.

The reminiscence is non-historical, in that Roman sets it very vaguely in a broader context of historical knowledge.²⁸⁷ There is nothing special about the fact that the events have been remembered without precise dating (unless a date has a peculiar symbolic significance attached to it). Normally, however, autobiographies tend to absorb certain subjectively essential pieces of information interpolated from later-gained knowledge. This absorption is most often so precise that in analysing a narrative, one finds it impossible to discern within it the memory of experience its later complementation. For some former inmates of Nazi concentration

287 Following A. Piotrowski's concept, one may describe this narrative as rooted 'in the milieu' rather than in history (or, theory). See A. Piotrowski, 'Zakorzenie w historii (teorii) – zakorzenie w milieu: analiza dwu odmian narracji', in *Biografia a tożsamość...*

camps, an important point of reference, when it comes to constructing an autobiography, is a document issued by the Arolsen-based International Tracing Service. Such a document contains, among other things, and to the extent such information is identifiable, the date of detention/arrest, specified time of stay at the camp (or, at each of the camps), subcamps, *Kommandos*, medical experiments to which the holder was subjected. Almost every former *kacet* inmate holds such a document, the information therein contained belonging to their autobiography.

Yet, it happens sometimes, as in the case of Roman Strój, that such data remain outside of the autobiography, not getting integrated within the story. If evoked, references are simply made to the data contained in the document. As Roman talked to me, his Arolsen document lay on the table we were seated at. Hence, my Interlocutor points out to this certificate, believing this concrete piece of historical evidence might be of importance to me. He knows that the recording, once taken, will be inserted in the Mauthausen Memorial Site Archive, hence the references he is making: “it is already recorded, in there”; “And this date is noted down as well”; “There you’ve got it, it’s there, some day August, you’d have to check up”.

This rather careless attitude towards the dates in his own biography that could be believed important does not at all mean that the events attached to them are not quite important for this interviewee. The reasons for this trivialisation are probably of a very different kind, identifiable as Mr Strój’s low narrative competence, and his lack of experience in constructing a biographical story. Of no less importance is Roman’s age at the time the events he describes took place. His very young, still tender, age contributes to the shaping of the way he experiences (and memorises) these trajectorial occurrences. A *Kommando* composed of very young inmates – the aforesaid *Jungkommando* – was peculiar not only owing to the low average age: the young people working in that team, some of them simply children, experienced and understood their surrounding camp reality differently than the inmates more advanced in years – and even more differently if compared to those ‘established’ in the camp. The clash with the camp was probably even more scaring for them. The roughness of this narrative may be a sign of the trauma which accompanied that event.

The incompetence of the newly arriving prisoners, their lack of skill to easily adapt, outright helplessness, their utter take-pot-luck attitude, was not only rooted in the bewilderment triggered by the crossing of the camp gate but also in the situation that in autumn 1944 prevailed in Nazi concentration camps – in Mauthausen and its subcamps in particular, as they were concealed in the depth of the Reich. This complex became the destination place for numerous transports going away (‘evacuated’) from the other camps situated closer to the frontlines moving towards them. Thousands of prisoners were flowing to Mauthausen from Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Mittelbau-Dora, Groß-Rosen, Ravensbrück, Flossenbürg, and Sachsenhausen. This caused enormous chaos and overcrowding, even more deteriorated conditions (especially, want of food), and a radically diminished chance to survive. The outcome was a sudden increase in the death rates – with those newly coming dying the fastest. For the new transports, the Mauthausen

camp was just a transit place on their way to one of the subcamps. After the first selection done on the spot, through the quarry labour, Roman Strój got employed ordinance factories in Vienna.

The reminiscence of the transport from Mauthausen is preceded by another image which got activated in his memory and triggered a digression:

And, interestingly, as I visited Mauthausen lately, with our excursion, // of our club, then I didn't notice, // my colleague did. He says, 'Roman, get back to the crematorium and look at there, there is a whole set of our colleagues who were assigned from Mauthausen to Vienna, for the *Arbeitskommando*.'

He probably refers to the plaque commemorating the prisoners sent to the subcamp, as part of that same transport, who did not live to see the liberation.

The narrator instantly resumes the main thread, telling us about his experience from September 1944 to April 1945:

To the *Arbeitskommando* at Schwechat, there was such one, and later I was moved to Schwechat and Mödling. But in the first stage, we were brought, the Germans brought us to... // it writes [i.e. 'is written', the form commonly used in uneducated colloquial Polish] there... // Wie-... Floridsdorf.²⁸⁸ But there, we only were, were for a night or two, as the fact was, there were bombings, this-that, of the Allies, and they sent us there, and later on, from that camp already, they directed us to Schwechat, it is an airport in Vienna, and there we were....

And later on, those who were ailing already, and I just appeared as one such, then they sent us to the various so-called quarters. Am I right in what I'm saying? No, // right I am, a manor [Polish, *rewir*] was, like, a health centre, as they name it, the manor. What was that called?... Did I say it right?... Well, I should think so. In any case, since in that camp in Schwechat ... the conditions were like... // 'Cause it was a plane factory which was destroyed, in fact, to some, sort of, in ninety percent by the Allies. I don't know if, there, the Americans, or the English, whatever. And there, the Germans endeavoured to teach us the craft. That is, the plumbers, as if, right? Well, but me, I just had a situation like, some sort of, so called phlegm, or phlegmon, or

288 Wien-Floridsdorf was one of the numerous camp complexes, focused on manufacture of arms in the last months of the war. The camp was set up in the middle of July 1944, after the inmates were evacuated from the Schwechat-Heidefeld camp bombed by the Allied Forces. Apart from the main camp, the Wien-Floridsdorf complex included the Wien-Hinterbrühl (otherwise named Wien-Mödling) subcamp as well as several working *Kommandos*: Hofherr & Schrantz, Jedlese, Santa I, Santa II, Santa III (otherwise named Wien-Schwechat). The Commandant of the entire complex was Anton Streitwieser. The number of inmates in each of those subcamps is undeterminable, the only known fact being that the prisoners in the whole complex totalled 2,737 – mostly, Poles and Russians. 1st April 1945 marked the evacuation of the entire camp to Mauthausen; the death march, ended on 11th April, killed 121 prisoners, with another 22 vanished or fled.

something of the sense, the lungs, correct? Well, and there, in that manor, was, like, an Ukrainian. And says the Ukrainian, I mean, the feldsher, he was not a doctor, he was a feldsher. And he says, in Russian, to me. ‘*Kak sobaki sawa ne zyesh, to padokhnyosh, i tak, i tak*’ [= ‘If you don’t eat a dog’s fat, die you will, whatever the case’]. Then says he, ‘Where’s it that you want to go?’ And I’m saying, well, I’d like to... // What is it that I could dispute now, yeah? ‘You’ve got the power.’ Then, he directed me [t]here, to Mödling²⁸⁹ itself, to this Mödling, the subcamp. The *Arbeitskommando* in Mödling. And it is in Vienna too.

I learned from the elder mates that there, in Mödling, ... was an aircraft factory. ... This was the mountains, rocky ones. // And the Germans, or Austrians, made, such, production halls, and there the planes were normally manufactured. ... In any case, it was like this: the *Arbeitskommando* camp Schwechat and the *Arbeitskommando* camp Mödling. In Mödling, I was at the manor there. ‘Cause once that Ukrainian man found that I was *bolnoi* [‘sick’] there, well, then, ‘Go out of Schwechat!’, for, to do a work – not any more, just up there, to Mödling.

The whole narrative sequence quoted above is not essentially different from the preceding one: the content of the events and occurrences evoked is different, but the way the story is constructed proves quite similar. The central character/narrator is continually lost, entirely subject the pressure of external circumstances, with no room for an initiative of his own.²⁹⁰ This condition is not even transgressed by a reminiscence – the first such in his camp narrative – of an individual interaction with another inmate, a Ukrainian. The situation of that man was completely different: acting as a physician in a camp ‘manor’, he remains a prisoner all the same. And, he is willing to help. Meanwhile, the dialogue between him and the narrator which is (re)constructed here shows and reconfirms that the former’s situation was one of complete impotence, being at the mercy of fortune, or rather, at the decision, or mercy, of the others. Even where there is some vaguely appearing space for making a choice of his own, his lostness and fear prevent him from upsetting the belief expressed as “What is it that I could dispute now”, and, “You’ve got the power”. In these snatches of the conversation with the Ukrainian man, our

289 Roman Strój misnames the subcamp several times, calling it ‘Methling’; actually, there was no such name. What he means is, most probably, Wien-Mödling. This is coherent with historical studies as well as with the other pieces of information given in this account. Today, Mödling is a small county town within the Vienna agglomeration.

290 In another account, an inmate who, then aged twelve, in the course of the Warsaw Uprising ended up, together with his father, in Mauthausen and subsequently in Gusen, so describes a similar state: “That incessant fear and threat... I was lost in the camp, overwhelmed by all that. During the occupation, I was a rather seasoned child, but when I got into the camp, I felt completely helpless.”; account of Wojciech Topolewski, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_021 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner).

attention is drawn by a characteristic sentence – quite importantly, formulated partly in Russian, the ‘feldsher’ utters at the sight of a sick, literally half-dead, young Pole. The camp doctor’s conviction that without being healed with canine fat (or suet – possibly, the only such fat somehow available at that time and place), Interlocutor had no chance to survive, is evoked not only for informative purposes. The quoted sentence embeds the Ukrainian feldsher in a strong stereotype²⁹¹ of a tough and seasoned man of the East who can manage and get by in extreme circumstances. This stereotype is one of the filters at work here, operating between the experience being referred to and the moment he is talking to me (a little less than seventy years afterwards). What this filter does is admit into the memory only certain selected events, which are being attached a biographical meaning.

Quite like with the preceding fragments, Roman Strój is not completely certain about the historical details – the dates or names. His narrative remains crude, rough, and non-historical. Even the name of the camp pseudo-hospital – the ‘manor’, which otherwise usually forms part of an interiorised prisoner vocabulary, is uttered here only after a moment of hesitation, suspense:

Am I right in what I’m saying? No, // right I am, a manor was, like, a health centre, as they name it, the manor. What was that called?... Did I say it right?... Well, I should think so.

These names, dates, and details remain distant. Like the planes bombing the arms factories. They were certainly flying through, throwing bombs and destroying various industrial plants in Vienna, but whether the planes were English (British) or American, he would not tell. These historic facts are of no importance to Interviewee: “I don’t know if, there, the Americans, or the English, whatever”.

This roughness of memory is alleviated, to some extent, by the knowledge gained from his elder colleagues. Not even knowledge, really: a curious detail – so it was for a young boy from Warsaw who was told that planes were being manufactured in the tunnels cut in the rock. The tone he uses when narrating it testifies that the fact has remained a curiosity, in a sense, till this day. More important than the piece of information in itself is the fact that there are colleagues appearing who are ready to share the news. This comes as a pale trace of the inmates’ brotherhood, be in on the level of elementary communication. And, it is a scratch on the image of a mass of lost prisoners unable to build any social relationships, even if fragmentary.

For young prisoners who were put into the Mauthausen system of camps in the last months of its functioning, the key occurrence was coming across an elder,

291 For more on stereotypes in autobiographical narratives, see Z. Bokszański, *Stereotypy a kultura*, Wrocław 2001, esp. Chapter IV of the monograph – ‘Stereotypes and common ideas of nations and ethnic groups’, pp. 41–54. Further on therein, this author differentiates analytically between the ‘paradigm’ and ‘ideological pattern’ of the alien. I stick herein to ‘stereotype’, as a more general and common notion.

more experienced and better domesticated within the camp – the meeting of a biographical caregiver.²⁹² There could actually be more such protectors, at various moments and places, as the changes were occurring too often for such a bond to be sustained. The Ukrainian doctor, feldsher, was the first such biographical caregiver to Roman Strój. It went to his credit that my Interlocutor was moved from the armament factory in Schwechat to a ‘manor’ of a neighbouring subcamp. This is perhaps what he owes his survival to. That is to say, this may have been one of the reasons: there must have been more such events. Subsequently, when already at the Mödling subcamp’s manor:

And in Mödling, I was lucky enough, // well, a blessing in disguise, I think, // that I was the first, first person from Warsaw, from the Warsaw Uprising. And there were Poles too, there was, among others, a doctor, Krakowski was his name. I think I can remember his name, Krakowski, doctor Krakowski, who was the so-called *arct* [German, *Arzt*, i.e. physician]. An *arct* is the doctor for the whole camp. In spite of his being a prisoner, right? And he says, well, that he says, what, to me. Well, fir they were asking, how about the Warsaw there, what’s up, how ’bout the rising. Well, I told them all the story. And well, later, says he, ‘You’ve been ordered to go to Mauthausen, with that sickness of yours.’ And the trip to Mauthausen was normally concluded with death, because the misters like me were only made ready for the crematorium. Well, and so, there was a Gehenna, such that I was [i.e. started] crying there, laid myself at his feet, kissed his feet and so on, for him not to dispatch me to Mauthausen. And so, well, he left me there. He let me stay, and I was on [= at] the manor, on [= at] that camp outpatient clinic, a sort of assistant was I there. That is, I mean, I was sick a bit and stayed in that manor as a patient, but at the same time helped those *Stubendiensts*, am I right?

This time, help does not come as easily as the previous one. Now, it needs being obtained by entreaty, begged for. The Interviewee’s situation consequently changes: he no more remains completely passive, entirely dependent on the others.

292 The motif of encountering such a caregiver, or guardian, reappears in numerous accounts of prisoners from this group, some of whom recollect a complete organised system of assistance. Here is a fragment of another account, with respect to helping those new to the camp: “There was an organisation in Gusen area, composed of the elder mates who had been serving their camp term for a longer time, and were on [i.e. held] the functions. When those elder prisoners got to know that we were from the Uprising, decided to take care about us. They’d bring us some extra bread, or a bowl of soup. I was helped by a man from Poznań. When he received his parcels, he’d always bring some extra food. I can remember, just before the Christmas, he presented me with one onion, one apple, a piece of gingerbread and a bit of salt so I could rub my gums with, as my teeth were beginning to wobble, scurvy was getting developed.”; account of Lech Milewski, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_006 (recorded by Małgorzata Mroczkowska).

He becomes increasingly knowledgeable of the peculiar camp situation, knowing from somewhere (probably, from the other inmates) that given his health, being dispatched to the central camp of Mauthausen equals a death sentence.

The reminiscence of his despair and humiliation brought about by that desperate combat for his life is one of the most dramatic images in Roman's entire account. It is not just that what he recalls is dramatic – psychologically tough in terms of telling a story about, as it enforces the unveiling, or debilitation, of the narrator's certain defence mechanisms. Dramatic was also the very situation to which this reminiscence is related: lostness and isolation, plus recognition of his own situation. A fifteen-year-old boy, the only one from the Warsaw transport who ended up in that Vienna subcamp remains helpless and at the mercy of the others. His judgement is insufficient, and he has no acquaintances in the camp, and thus is incapable of activating social capitals (within the inmate community) to increase the chance to survive, but his will to live is extremely strong. By the time he has subdued threat to the extent enabling him to comprehend that he might lose his life so easily in a moment, he reaches for the only weapon available to him in this situation: he attempts to arouse pity, to refer to another inmate's sensitivity. He quite clearly believes that this other man still has some human sentiments, not completely trampled in him by the camp reality. And he is not let down: he is allowed to stay in the hospital for longer and work as an assistant. This entreated assistance will save his life again, but this stage, again, would not last long. The attempts at getting successfully hidden in a safe place, better labour, some function, all fail. Even though some elder inmates relent a little and he manages to wait out somewhere, this state would not last long. The last months in the camp prove very hard; things are changing extremely fast – fast indeed for the newly arriving prisoners, as they are sent to the subcamps and working *Kommandos* that are just being created, some being closed a few months later, others moved somewhere else. Everything is in constant motion, but these short-lived subcamps are devised not only for having the prisoners isolated and emaciated through labour. In this last phase of their existence, in almost each of these numerous subcamps, the armaments production was in full blow; at that particular place, aircrafts were assembled, in the first place. Thus, the camp prisoners' labour was seriously made part of a design that was completely crazy and obsessive at that time: the will to redirect the course of events, and make victory in this war still possible.

Roman Strój has to rejoin a regular working *Kommando*. Being a youngster, he would not go to the factory, but instead, to an unspecialised order-keeping team, doing a variety of auxiliary jobs.

And that lasted for some time, until their potential was finally exhausted, and so was mine, and they directed me with this to the *Arbeitskommando*. ... I had quite a number of Germans with me [in the *Kommando* – PF's note]. This Franz, he was a *kapo*..., *Lagerbau* – no, hang on: *Lagerbau* was a higher big-shot. But he was a *kapo* for this *Arbeitskommando* business. The *Arbeitskommando*, that was him, this Franz was exactly the *kapo* who was responsible for the labour in its entirety. Then, we, like,

we wouldn't enter there, into that plane factory. We worked as an attendance crew for that *Arbeitskommando*, that is, the enclosed place. We were doing everything we were commanded to do. I mean, either some were painting the barracks there, the others peeling potatoes, others still carrying some pots, of some sort, and others still, let's say, were digging some pits there, and pelted cinder into there. In any case, that *Arbeitskommando* there... was tasked to do all the clearouts inside the camp. Or, the subcamp, for the main camp was Mauthausen, and that was a subcamp.

The sentence "We were doing everything we were commanded to do" is at the centre of this reminiscence. Again, this statement unveils to us a piece of the truth about that experience. Not the truth and experience about/of the camp in general, but the truth and experience of my Interlocutor. The whole reminiscence of that labour is reduced to the instructions being executed on a collective basis.

The subsequent stage of collective experience was the aircraft assembling work at the armaments factory. The fact that the narrator has appeared there is shown as an occurrence in no way dependent on him: he ends up in a mining tunnel, as he was 'directed' there. This was Roman's last camp job, and he performed it until the very last moments of this Viennese subcamp factory. The reminiscence of the work as such is intertwined in Interviewee's memory with the final moment of the camp's liquidation. Should we wish to analyse the facts about the factory's operation and its subsequent liquidation, we ought to get these two reminiscences untangled. However, trailing the very memory, we can quote a longer narrative passage:

And, we walked down along those adits. Because later on, as this work was ended, ... then I was sent to do a work with those planes. And again, I walked up or down the stairs, there were, like, the stairs, you walked around there. And there was the whole world already, and a half of America. That is, the Russians, and the French, and the Germans, and the Poles, and this-that. Well, and it was just there that German supervision was, ... the German civilian supervision. Apart from these, that the SS were there and so on, there were Germans and professionals in those aircraft matters. And they were setting the direction for us: what, // where I am supposed to do, to stand. And he gave me such a, for instance, hammer, a pneumatic hammer. I stood at the outer side of the fuselage, we're mounting, and there, some Russian stood on that [other] side, and the rivet, a rivet is a rivet, //we were clinching, no, it was him that was holding that top, and I, there, with my, buzzzzzz. And, such a thing.

This lasted rather short, ... because the Russians were already marching toward Vienna, and the Americans were marching toward Vienna. So... Well, yes: on April the thirtieth, they were already in Vienna. This was so, this is what seems to me. ... Well, that work was such as I'm saying. And, at some moment, we're watching, arriving at work in the morning, and those ones there, the German miners [i.e. mine-layers], are setting the fuses, and the plastic already, that TNT to get all that blown out. In spite of us doing all that all the time. [*laughs*] ... Just like that. And those ones, you can see, just as it is, those charges, him screwing that blasting cap in. You could see all that, before the very eyes they were doing it. Well, it was so, really. But the thing was that

we still went [i.e. managed to go] out, and the explosion followed after our exit. They had cleansed everything, and all those tunnels, all the stores there, whatever was there under the ground. 'Cause the Russians were on their way. And they wanted to get it hidden from the Russians, to destroy it, so that the Russians wouldn't catch it. 'Cause that is, after all, a... That's what it seems, this was all in the documentation. All that. Those planes, whole ones, that's just [i.e. were fit] for flying. ...

I'm not saying here what the conditions of working were there, and in that *Arbeitskommando*. For those civilians, they were various, too. Some, they'd support us, some sort of little hunks he would give, in secret, of bread, or something. And some were not taken into account, same as the..., and... Because, either he was afraid of that German, SS-man, or didn't want to have conflicts, of one sort or another, for maybe he was bound to the work. They knew already the end was coming, that the *Krieg kaput* already. But they didn't want, couldn't demonstrate it. // Civilians, I's talking about those civilians. // They couldn't display that so much, 'cause... Well, they preferred to stay aside, not getting involved in these matters. 'The SS is in charge of this, the camp's in charge, and we've got here just such, like, casual activities.' // And well, once that whole entertainment with this work on those planes was over, on the first, I should think, the first... April the thirtieth, or thirty... first, just a second, a moment... May, that was May the fifth, but we probably walked eight days to there. That, in any case, before April the thirtieth.

The arms factory is astonishing not only because it is hidden in a mining tunnel. The narrator is also astonished at the variety of the prisoners and civilians working there, or rather, a single aspect of the venue: the nationalities. This diversity is not making the narrator enthusiastic (as is easy to judge by his voice): it emphasises and reinforces his 'lost' status. This is yet another new situation, one more difficulty he has to deal with. Roman will do so the way he can do it – by keeping a distance toward non-Polish inmates and focusing on the work he is doing. Hence, the colleague he works directly with, while riveting some fuselage elements, remains a nameless Russian [the Polish has *Rusek* here, a colloquial and rather coarse form. (Transl. note)]; instead of zooming on that man, we are learning about some technicalities of the labour being performed, including attempted imitation of its accompanying sounds.

The work at the plane factory called for engineer's knowledge and engineer supervision, hence the appearances of Austrian and German experts to supervise the inmates. Their presence was not merely technology-oriented. The very fact that they came in the camp interactions – with the inmates, or the SS-men – somehow modified these interactions, especially at the points they transgressed their entrusted roles as technology experts and overseers. Roman is constructing a real image of technological supervision but also attempts, using no specific examples this time, to somehow generalise their attitudes.²⁹³ Such generalisation is

293 Both the specific examples of these interactions and attempts at generalising them reappear in several accounts. Here is an example from the neighbouring camp of

not easy, as the memory evokes different examples. Some 'experts' tried to assist in a low: "some sort of little hunks he would give, in secret, of bread, or something"; others "were not taken into account, same as the..." (probably, as the SS-men). On the whole, they are perceived by Interviewee as standing aside, not-quite-resolute, afraid of getting involved in helping ("hey didn't want, couldn't demonstrate it"), for they reported to the in-camp SS authority. And, they were scared with the approaching end of the war. Worried about their own hides, they are waiting for the Russians to arrive imminently: the Russian army was liberating the territory – for the prisoners, not quite for the civilians. Roman Strój is a keen observer. A short moment of relative stabilisation offered by the factory labour, after several months of incessant urging chasing away from one camp to another, reinstates visual acuity.

The reprieve during the 'entertainment with the work on the planes' did not last long, though we cannot tell exactly how long. Based on the account, what we know is that this moment heralds a dramatic conclusion of Roman's camp career. An image remains from those last moments, which aroused affright among the inmates: planting explosive charges in the factory which was still in operation. This image is primarily built of his own (and collective) experiences, and only to a

Wiener Neustadt: "I dealt, mainly, with two of those. One was an engineer. He walked around with the swastika in the lapel, that one scowled at me. Constantly. And, the other one would come over, I don't know who he was, I think we addressed him 'foreman', he always came to take care of that heater. Because, as I've mentioned, I worked at the heater where I warmed the rivets and passed [them] forth, then, he'd always bring something along in a dinner-pail, some elevenses for himself, apparently, 'cause he'd bring it in the morning and put it on that heater so it got warmed up for him. Then, he'd always say something, exchange some sentence, rub his hands, and many a time tried to put there a piece of cigarette, or a whole cigarette, but before then he looked around intensely whether no one can see it, naturally implying to me that I can pick it up for myself. I can say that the man was not troubling me, rather quite the contrary."; account of Michał Fertak, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_019 (recorded by Monika Kapa-Cichocka).

In some factories, certainly those most strategic ones, the position of foremen was much stronger. Let me quote a fragment of the reminiscence of an 'old inmate' of Mittelbau-Dora camp: "There were sixteen thousand people at that time, working in the adits. The winter is on, etc. ... So, there was von Braun and there were civilians who worked in the tunnels. They knew how that man was being treated, how that *Häftling* was treated. And they caused this, so we could be warmed up a bit. They sorted in out in Berlin ... that thirty litres of class-four Jamaica rum or thirty litres of Polish vodka was poured into the cauldron of tea, three hundred litres. And this went on to the cans and was passed to the adits, so the people could get warmed up a little. So those labouring beings may still be alive."; account of Adam Stręk, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. ISFLDP_054.

small degree, of the historical knowledge – although the latter is present too when it comes to mentioning the Russians moving in and the documents the Germans or Austrians endeavoured to destroy before the Russians could enter. This knowledge sticks in the memory alongside his own experiences, but the two areas are not very well composed reciprocally. This narrator lacks practice in constructing biographical narrative about those experiences, which is apparent (even more so in the audio layer); this deficit is also visible, once again, in the way he introduces the dates.

My Interviewee can remember (and knows it, at the same time) that the way he made from the subcamp to Mauthausen took eight days. Yet, he is getting lost as he tries to determine the initial and the final date of the march. He tries to refer to the date the central camp was liberated, as firmly set in the former Mauthausen inmates' memory – the fifth of May.²⁹⁴ However, this reference does not change much. He is getting increasingly lost amidst the dates, and so he tries to refer to a more reliable source: the Arolsen certificate, lying on the table all the time. I then try to more actively participate in the conversation, to somehow help him specify, the moment I can grasp it matters for my Interviewee:

[PF:] It says here, eight of April, I think?

[RS:] Eighth of April, where?

[PF:] Eighth of April, to Mauthausen.

And the tip works: the story, slightly supported, goes on freely²⁹⁵ and will now lead us through Roman Strój's key camp-related experience. Not his personal experience – the one shared by a very large group of prisoners who in autumn 1944 got from Warsaw to Mauthausen, and were thereafter sent to one of the numerous, relatively small, factory subcamps.²⁹⁶ This experience has been named 'the death march':

294 Exceptions occur in this respect too, where the survivor is aware of a different liberation date than the official one: "[TP:] I went to that factory until May the eight still. [PF:] Until May the fifth, as the liberation was on the fifth. [TP:] The eighth! Eighth of May, Mauthausen. [PF:] No, what the documents say is the fifth. [TP:] But why? What I know is, the eight, in case it comes... // in the documents... // Eighth of May, sir, // all of my lifetime. Maybe they made a mistake there. Eighth of May it was, sir."; account of Teofil Płonka, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_066.

295 This moment offers a good example testifying that narrative interview, even if unrestrained, can also be a dynamic interaction; the postulate that the researcher be withdrawn to the position of (passive) listener ought not to be approached much dogmatically.

296 The distance between Vienna and Mauthausen exceeds 100 km; some of the subcamps were located even further off the central unit.

Well, the eighth of May, well, let's go for it. That is, on the eighth of April, we left Mauthausen, the... We left Schwechat, Mödling, and all those... 'Cause, as the fellows were later winding up in those subcamps of Vienna, then all those *Arbeitskommandos* were getting merged into a single cluster. What I mean is this. From Schwechat, the one I was [in] at the beginning, they went to Mödling. From Mödling did we go to that Floridsdorf, and, on the way, ... they merged together or broke up. For they, the Germans, did such a thing that they did not want to push that forward in large groupings. That is, each grouping had a determined amount [number] of prisoners. Let us say, three hundred or five hundred, I don't know. But, whatever the case, we were joined together. Mödling was joined with Schwechat, and formed one group. And this was like, on the one side and on the other side the SS-men were walking, or, later on, there were less and less SS-men. I don't know the reason, perhaps they were fleeing... And, to our *Stubendiensts*, and to those, well... operating under the direction of the Germans, they put on them the German uniforms without, without the..., without the distinctions, the rifles, and they guarded us. But it was like this then, the second half of the march, on the arrival to Mauthausen. Yet... I mean, that is, based on what I noticed, then, who could have been such a soldier without any authorisation. Who was, for instance, some night-watcher in the *Lager*, who was some functional man, *kapo*, and behaved well, ... the SS-men had a good opinion about him. This was the sort that they'd dress in German uniforms and give them rifles. I don't know if those rifles were loaded or not; there were rifles, in any case. And they, with those rifles, just like that, a German walked, one of them, here, let's say; then, a Pole, we're assuming, the second one; that *Stubendienst*, some sort of, the third – a Ukrainian, or Russian, and then again, a German, and again, something of a sort. So, they kept guard on one another, kept guard on those, so, if this be the case, they wouldn't get some prank... And so did we arrive at the central camp of Mauthausen, out of which we had departed.

My Interviewee's attempts at setting his narrative in the context of dates is problematic for him. He requests me to help him out, as he feels it is an obstacle for him to continue building his story; so, he suspends it, asking me for assistance – once I have shown my readiness to let myself speak, for the same cause:

[RS:] And that was, just, as you've read it out here, on the eighth, right? The eighth of April. That was from Mauthausen, yes? The march-out from Mauthausen, right?

[PF:] Not really: to Mauthausen, on the eighth.

[RS:] That is, the departure from Vienna...

[PF:] The arrival in Mauthausen.

We have determined once again (and, not for the last time during this meeting) that the date, 8th April, as officially recorded, refers to the arrival in Mauthausen. That day marked the finish of the eight-day way from the subcamp located near Vienna. Once the accuracy of the facts has been established, the narrator once again dives, much deeper this time, into the story of his 'death march'. The memory activates now newer and newer recollections of the way he was making, which

prevents Roman from getting the story closer to the route's destination. Once he has reached it, he resumes in the subsequent sentences some of the earlier, now animated, images. His narrative, rather terse and concise so far, is now spilling quite extensively:

'Cause we were walking on foot all the time. As they say, in those columns, right? And we stood, just like that, outdoors. It was like, when you walked on those Austrian hills, mountains, in fact, it was snowing, regularly, or the area was covered with snow, and we, each had one blanket on him or her. Meaning, wrapped in the blanket. And that blanket was wet, it's quite clear, isn't it, that it couldn't be dry, no way, you know, being like that. Then, we'd take such a thing, that we, by the brook, or wherever, on the grass, where it was relatively dry... Dry – this notion did not exist at all, but that's what we were naming it. And, a mate would lay one blanket, I... 'Cause there were four [of us], for instance, in these blankets. And then, you'd cuddle [one another], well, so it was. And the Germans, ... when they made [i.e. ordered], like, a rest for the night, then they ... would place these machine guns on the nipples and, well, they held us at gunpoint throughout. And, they many a time threw [shafts of] light with the spotlights. ... But getaways happened all the same, there were getaways, some sort of ...

Aha, let me, perhaps, resume that march, as we were driven from this Vienna. From Vienna to Mauthausen. Then, there were various scenes occurring. Because the SS-men behaved in different ways. The point is, they oftentimes had situations, like, that they've tanked up, and then, well, ... vented anger on us. Humorous, every S[S]-man wanted to show off before the others, what he's up to. Well, then, when there were those hills, they had us chased across those mountains. There, the fellows were rushing forth, and never standing up again. Well, that's rather plain and simple. Later on, what followed... There were things, like, that people couldn't stand it, whether physically, or psychically, and asked the SS-men to be killed. Me, with my own eyes, with a mater, such an elderly man, a Pole, we were leading him, arm-in-arm, and it occurred that he couldn't [make it] any more at all. An interesting thing being that the organism surrenders in the mountains, and is completely broken yet, thoroughly. You cannot even stand up, that is, cannot even stay upright, but is merely falling down. And, well, that elderly man says to us, 'Go rescue yourselves, lads, because I cannot go up that mountain, whatever the case.' And, at the foot of those hills, it usually was like this. You'd go up that hill, and was powerless yet. And it's like shuffle-shuffle-shuffle, and those *ausliders* [?] outsiders] that were withdrawn by the SS-men, and so-called *Todkommando* ['death *Kommando*' (PF's note)] went on, and they killed those people. They listed the numbers – the German accuracy! They listed the numbers – everyone had his or her number on the plate. They took the numbers down, and this *Kommando* was burying those people as they went no. So, I could see [it] in that march, every day.

And, the people couldn't stand all that any more, and wanted to be killed. How was that being carried out? Like, groups of people. For example, we are going, turning there, going on somewhere, and there's a clearing, right? The clearing's on the right, and we're doing that wavy line, going along the roadway. Yeeah, yeeah, yeeah... It's

to that clearing that the people were rushing, on purpose, like, you know, last-ditch effort. They rushed to that clearing so the Germans shoot them dead. And this was coming about. We're looking, the shots: bah-bah-bah-bah, bah-bah-bah-bah, bah-bah-bah-bah... They're already lying down. And, an interesting thing, all those that I saw, three maybe, or five, crosswise. Everyone, the sign of cross [*sic*]. I don't know what that, was it... For, as he ran, perhaps he rolled over and thus... But, in any case, that has stuck in my memory. Why, that this cross?... Everywhere, everybody whoever fell down there, did it crosswise.

Well, so it was. That's how you marched on to this Mauthausen. And, you'd go these eight days, indeed, from Vienna. There, well, various situations there were on the way, especially in the night. Because...

Aha, and the troops withdrawing from the front. It was between these SS-men who were leading us and the Germans who were going on [= by] the tanks, or armoured cars, various, like, dissensions were produced. 'What're you doing, in here? Leading the people? Go off to the front!' Also, there, among those Germans, quarrels occurred, and they even resorted to small arms. For those ones were not afraid of these, and these, in turn, believed that it is quite an awful thing that we're [= they are] fighting at the warfront and the gentlemen here are leading their Negros. So, that, also such various scenes were taking place. Well, but, in any case, those SS-men who were leading were autocratic, and we were subjected to their will. Or, if they wanted it, we were still alive, and if they didn't want it, then we were dead. Whoever has succeeded, he... In any case, I shouldn't like to hazard a guess, how many there were of those who got killed on their way, but a half for certain, I daresay. Which means, if there were, say, a few thousand going, then half of those thousands ended up buried. On their way. For, it was the eight days, after all. And, the first days were such that we had nothing for the first three days. No bread, no of the... Nothing, completely nothing. Only later on, there surfaced, some, the sort of... So, the people were exhausted, ravenous, so much up those hills... If that terrain was passably flat, then some more would've survived, still. But, well, as regards myself, then, a *kapo*, an Ukrainian, I should think, when we've reached Mauthausen, then he saw me and says, 'And, you've survived?' He was astonished. In Russian, like that, but I say [i.e. replied him] in Polish. Says he, 'And you too? I thought you're gone already.' And, so it was, there were miracles like these. And that's what mostly was, there were such incidents. That, some...

Aha, still, a moment like this. The Russians who were there with us together, I mean, the *Häftlings* too, also the camp's inmates, then, as they were watching us getting perished, for the Poles were, after all, psychologically weaker than those other nations; particularly, from the *Russkis* [colloq., Russians] – then, the *Russkis* said, 'Yob tvoiu mat', *shto thci polyatchki... pogib, pogib, pogib.*' [= Fuck your mother, what, those Poles... Fallen, fallen fallen.] And they kept wondering why the Poles are perishing so quickly. And, they're exposing themselves to the bullets. Are not willing to live. And they, as long as he [= they; Mr R.S. generally tends to use colloquialisms, grammatical and other. (Transl. note)] could, one would scuffle. That was beyond dispute. So, the Russians could have been impressive with their, a sort of... The tough climate, and they had a real-life example to follow, for they had not been there overly nursed, we

know it well what it was like, yeah? So, those SS-men's trolleys, were pushed, drawn, by the *Russkis*, largely. There, some S[S]-man, if he was, say, a good man, would give some whack to somebody. A good piece of a slice of bread, or something of the sense. In any case, they were those draught horses. And were drawing those carts. 'Cause an S[S]-man wouldn't draw the cart, would he. And there they had various things of theirs. And, well, the... Well, anything else we might be curious about?...

A mere eighty days – and this jagged storyline covering those events so much place in this autobiography. This cannot be otherwise, since Roman Strój's memory has preserved these images as his key biographical experience: unparalleled, irreducible to any other experience, non-generalizable, shattering the narrative.

The previous, hardened, downright monotonous rhythm of labouring at the camp factory is cancelled all of a sudden – and replaced by a different rhythm: the one of daily marching, where only the steps are monotonous. Everything else around is subject to incessant and baffling change. Although the whole way he has made, up to the conversation with a Russian when already at the destination, in Mauthausen, is shown in this narrative as a collective experience, my Interviewee never ceases to carefully scout around and observes the occurring events on various, as if parallel, stages. This is his eighth month in the camp: long enough for the survival instinct to made the senses as keen as possible. His increased vigilance and careful observation helped him make the toughest of all the ways he had made in his lifetime. The tension of yore has left in him the trace in the form of memory and a story, so dense, on his participation in the death march. Like the whole account, the story is constructed as a collective, or group, experience. Roman Strój remains one of the many, in the driven mass of anonymous prisoners.

The image of the death march emerging out of this reminiscence has not much to do with the walking as such – certainly, not with marching as a troop formation, although the prisoners were supposed to be marching in columns. This was a horrible roaming across the mountains and hills, in the snow, rain, and mud: 'shuffle-shuffle'. The nights spent on the grass, by the brook, under the open sky; exhaustion; hunger; the prisoners wrapped in wet blankets; the elderly forced to rely on the younger ones, on their last leg themselves; the prisoners begging the SS-men for mercy and for putting them out of their misery with a death shoot – the shoots are heard from time to time; some prisoners acting as supervisors, but their rifles might be empty; the others – the toughest – drawing the carts with the SS-men's possessions; the SS-men – drunk, entertaining themselves with driving the prisoners and subsequently knocking those who have fallen and cannot get up by themselves; digging the graves for those tormented to death or executed by firing squads; encounters with frontline Wehrmacht soldiers who cannot quite understand what they are seeing; and, in a different perspective: an SS-man treating his porter with bread!

There is no single adequate name Roman feels he could use to grasp all these images under. It is not only about him: perhaps such a name is simply inexistent. He later says, "all that, this Gehenna", thus attempting at grasping and consolidate

that experience. There are many more attempts made at harnessing the events he has lived through; these attempts accompany the strictly narrative fragments, as their interpretations and comments expressed as the story goes on.

He attempts to somehow rationalise the dying of the other prisoners marching together with this Interviewee along that terrible road to Mauthausen. The task is not easy, given that probably only half of the group reached their destination. A logical explanation is resorted to, though: the human “organism surrenders in the mountains, and is completely broken yet, thoroughly. You cannot even stand up, that is, cannot even stay upright, but is merely falling down”. Thus, the deaths of those people remains the domain of the laws of nature: the organism simply surrenders, and falls down. And, there is nothing that can be done about these laws: a human, certainly not the one shuffling along beside the narrator, cannot be held responsible for those ones who have dropped out, fallen down. Nature is ruthless and unforgiving, which is particularly true about the mountain nature: “If that terrain was passably flat, then some more would’ve survived, still”. My Interviewee somehow succeeds to explain the reasons behind certain deceases by referring to those biological-and-physical premises.

The other reason for the deaths is quite human, in turn: the ill will of the SS-men. Whenever this driver came to the fore, the victim had no chance to survive. The malevolence acted much in the way the laws of nature did – ruthlessly and irrevocably: “... those SS-men who were leading were autocratic, and we were subjected to their will. Or, if they wanted it, we were still alive, and if they didn’t want it, then we were dead”. There is not even a smallest room for anyone else’s own will. There is, instead, an absolute determinism, holding in its embrace the emaciated, hungry, and completely helpless prisoners.

The recognition of such cause and effect relationships is unsatisfactory, in itself. Roman looks for a meaning behind the deaths of his anonymous companions of that march – his fellow prisoners who fell or got killed on their way. This meaning is much more difficult for the narrator to identify. He finds a clue but is not certain whether it is the appropriate one. The clue – the one that ‘has stuck in his memory’ – is that “everywhere, everybody whoever fell down there, did it cross-wise”. Where does such an image come from? Is it that the dead corpses got indeed arranged in such a way on the grass, by the road? Or, were they so arranged by someone (by whom?)? Or maybe, it is the memory that has arranged them in such a manner, in search for a meaning in the image that needed being added sense to, in order to be assimilated. Those crosses must have meant something. What, namely? “Why, that this cross?...” The answer is unknown, although there are some answers arising. We can only make guess about them, as the narrator would not dare trace the thread down. It is mostly an instance of lack of resoluteness before himself, in unfolding his own suppositions, rather than revealing them in front of me. He just cracks a smile, perplexedly, as if he were not fully confident in himself.

It is not only death that has its metaphysics in this fragment of the story. Salvage, attainment of the destination when still alive, also has one. Roman mentions miracles and incidents in a single breath: “there were miracles like these

... there were such incidents". The status of both is similar here: they are tremendous powers, unusual forces. It is owing to their operation, extremely selective as it was, that my Interviewee has survived this way, finished the death march on his own feet.

The metaphysics of rescue and the metaphysics of death have a lot in common in this case. They belong to the same order of things, beyond human reach. With this interpretation, the deaths of the other prisoners as well as his own survival are decided somewhere far away – somewhere outside. It is hard to guess, though, whether they are decided by themselves or there is someone to resolve. Both options are possible, in fact: searching the sense, or meaning, does not have to be subject to binary logic.

Logical, in a colloquial sense – that is, coherent and consistent with the earlier ideas (those occurring before the autobiographical narrative, but not necessarily those preceding the autobiographical experiences) – is inserting the SS-men's and the *Rusek's* (Russian man's) behaviours within the stereotypical framework. The SS-men, taking down the prisoner numbers of the fallen (i.e. those killed by the march or in the march), fulfil the German accuracy. It is not important that a more extensive description of this march could have confirmed a contrary stereotype, should such one have functioned. In turn, those tough Russians: well, that's quite plain... My Interviewee has assumed, after all, that we, the Poles (including the two of us) know well how hard the life is there, in Russia; how inured the Russians had been in their own country, before they ended up in the camp: "they had a real-life example to follow, for they had not been there overly nursed, we know it well what it was like, yeah?". It does not matter that in case some other measurements were applied for the pace of dying, as mentioned by the narrator ('other' is not to imply reliable), it would appear that the Russians were perishing in Mauthausen equally fast, all the more that they were treated no less cruelly. Not just in Mauthausen: in concentration camps, on the whole.²⁹⁷

297 This is true particularly with the earlier period. Here is a fragment of the account of a prisoner who worked at an Auschwitz stable, and was hired for driving: "Later on, I carried corpses as well, the corpses of *Ruseks*. For, as you might know, Russia hadn't concluded an agreement on POWs, and they were treated like criminals. A horrible lot. I'm not going to tell you a story about it, in any case, [there were] terrible things that those *kapos* were doing with the *Ruskis*. They smashed their mugs with bludgeons, bullying, etc, And I was sitting on the cart, such, horror-stricken. If I rebuked, or something, then they'd thump me up as well. That was in winter, still. And I was carrying those corpses to the crematorium."; account of Adam Stręk, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. ISFLDP_054.

This image is also worth juxtaposing with fragments of a video-recorded account, produced as part of an MSDP project, featuring Konstantin Alexandrovich Shilov, a former Russian Mauthausen inmate; fragments thereof are available at the Mauthausen Memorial Site website: http://www.mauthausen-memorial.at/index_open.php.

Death march is a traumatic experience, which is not easily containable in a narrative. My Interviewee's biographical memory has cleaved this experience up into a course, if not a loose set, of independent episodes – each of which forms a separate scene. The narrator casts himself as a spectator. Thus, he keeps a distance to the dramatic and tragic events taking place. He would not endeavour to put them together into a single spectacle; he might have not manage to cope with a story like that. However, he remains aware that he is building his story using fragments of those experiences that his memory has let him set in motion. There are many. How many were unwanted by the memory, or unequivocal, we cannot tell. The suspending question: “Anything else we might be curious about?..”, concluding this reminiscence, offers us merely a guideline that certain experiences have remained concealed.

The trajectory of the death march does not close off the camp pathway. The march marked an evacuation, on foot, from the subcamp that had coincidentally been brought closer to the frontline, into one that is concealed further off, and is thus safer. Hence, the arrival at Mauthausen opens another stage of Roman Strój's camp experience – the next, and, this time, last, phase of his inmate career:

[RS:] Well, and? We arrived in that, on the eighth of April, to Mauthausen, and again: the *mikvah*, we rolled up the hill, because, you know, Mauthausen is on top. Then, as we walked there, from this Vienna, relatively, along the lowlands, but, like, the hills, yeah? And, finally, to Mauthausen are were going, to the central camp. And well, there, we were welcomed there with the *mikvah*. A cold water, like, a cool one, but in fact, the water was cold. And they said later on that it was their plan to have us gassed. But based on what the facts say, there was no gas there – it's just water that was there. And, most fortunately so. But so, they told us to strip naked, it was March, all the time.

[PF:] April.

[RS:] Ah yes, in April, that... But when we arrived in Mauthausen, it was the eighth, yes? The eighth of April. Right. That is, on the eighth of April, they told us to strip naked, and, to that *mikvah*. Under that cold water. We were thinking that we could somehow blow away, pretend that you're washing yourself, but avoid getting under that water, the cold water. But well, unfortunately not, that was impossible, as the *kapos* were walking with, such, whips 'round the fringes, and, well, 'Waschen, waschen, waschen!' there was. And, no wizardry 'bout it. Not going in? Wham!

And, well, later, like, shrunken, soaked, we're rushing for the barrack. And, the barrack, was like this. The first quarantine: 16, 17, 18, 20. Then came block 24, second quarantine. And everybody wanted to enter that block. I mean, a barrack it was, 'cause they dispensed there... there was some meal [served] yet. Meal did I say: some black coffee, and something to follow up. Well, and some rags, eh? That striped clothing. But, now, let bygones be bygones. In any case, they were crowding in there. Well, and, somehow, whoever could bear, whoever could stand all that, this Gehenna, then he'd reach the target, and survive. I am here because

I survived, after all. But not everybody succeeded, because... for various reasons. Well, let's say it to ourselves, endurance-related, or... He'd have the strength to...

This whole description of the rearrival in Mauthausen was evoked earlier on, between the death march images. Those images could not be held back; similarly, it is not easy to conclude the account on the last weeks at the camp. These areas are interpenetrative. Both reminiscences are revolving around the meaningful date, which is continually evoked: the eighth of April: revolving, alternately, on its both sides.

We returned on April the eighth, yes, April the eighth, to Mauthausen, then, well, it began, the normal way, on [= at] this block 24. I was [there], and my mates who had returned together with me. A regular camp life began. Based on what I can remember, only those morning and evening exercises has stuck in me [i.e. in my memory], which also mowed down the people 'just fine'. 'Cause that was [jumping] firecracker, whatever else, jumping, this, that. And we, for it already was, like... Eighth of April, and on the fifth, the liberation followed yet. That is, practically, some labours were still being performed there, but, camp-like ones, if any. That is, arrangement works. Whoever was still strong enough, for there were such ones, already, that... Because, for instance, every morning, out of our block, well, should I know, to tell the truth, ten, fifteen of them were going to the crematorium yet. And, in front of the crematorium building, as you went out of our quarantine, then you could see... Then you could see a whole, like, three-, well, just to be frank, three-storey... Three storeys, is quite a thing. Well, a pile, like, of human skeletons. That was accruing, like this. And the crematorium couldn't keep pace to combust all that. They had no idea then of how to get the matter off their hands. Meaning, they had the intention for this not to be visible...

Were it not absolutely certain that these fragments of the present account refer to the experiences of April and early May 1945, the last moments before the liberation, one might think some mistake, or a technical error, has occurred with the result that a piece of audio file has skipped over to an improper place. This scene mainly opens the associations with the arrival in the camp of a new transport of prisoners, a new *Zugang*, rather than the atmosphere of the last days before the liberation, as known from the other accounts. In the freeform narrative of my interviewee, this entry into the camp appears described in more detail than the first one; but there is no mistake, or defect, about it. Roman Strój's camp experience turned full circle. With the nine months spent in the *kacet*, he again sees himself as a confused newcomer – a *Zugang* indeed. He had never quit this role for good; certainly, he had never forgotten it. Contrary to those who survived for a number of years in such camps, activation of more efficient adaptation strategies did not fall to his lot. Well, he must have activated some – otherwise, he would not have survived; these strategies were mostly passive, withdrawal being predominant.²⁹⁸ The more active strategies were only accessible to senior prisoners.

298 For more on adaptation strategies within total institutions, see E. Goffman, *Asylums ...*, Chapter (essay) I. *On the Characteristics of Total Institutions*, pp. 1–125.

The bath, disinfection, allocation of striped clothing, cleaning works, morning and evening exercises that “moved down ... just fine”, traditional camp alimentation: “black coffee, and something to follow up” was all part of the standard ‘quarantine’ procedure. Even the reminiscence of fear of being gassed proves characteristic to many former inmates’ narratives about this experience. The failed attempt at avoiding cold bath, tamed by the screaming *kapos* with their whips, herding the prisoners into the showers, only reaffirms the prisoners’ conviction that there can be no deviation from the procedure. The procedure must be carried out.

There are, too, certain subtle differences in the narrative about the second quarantine, before the liberation. There are traces of the extremely intensive few months of condensed camp experience. Roman is reporting on the occurrences in a quiet fashion, without much emotion. The procedure he was put through again no more has its former initiation power – it would not shock or terrify to a like extent. And, it cannot act in its primary psychological role: it cannot activate the deprivation processes. Thrown into the gears of this machinery, the prisoners are no more new to it: they have nothing to be stripped of yet. Save for their lives. They are now *Häftlings*, and the deprivation process is behind them. They have been through it already, subjected to this specific processing, or treatment. Everything they are experiencing at the moment is merely the standard camp procedure, everyday life, routine: “then, well, it began, the normal way, on this block 24. I was [there], and my mates who had returned together with me. A regular camp life began”. This ‘regularity’ has a reverse facet as well: surrender, detachment, indifference. The camp language has coined a jargon description of such a mental (and physical) state: growing *Muselmann* – complete expiration of the inmate’s force to fight for his or her life.

Although Roman does not refer to this name, he knows the condition quite well – which is testified by the image quoted above. His experiences from the last days before the liberation are unfolding amidst the heaps of human corpses, piles of carcasses. Although it seeks refuge from those images, keeping them at a cool distance (“They had no idea then of how to get the matter off their hands”), his memory has preserved the experience of that dangerous closeness. My interviewee knows is aware (and, probably, feels it) that he has almost missed our talk, together with his whole post-camp life: “I am here because I survived, after all. But not everybody succeeded ...”. In those last months, the camp was devouring the highest numbers of victims.²⁹⁹

In terms of what the last days spent in the camp were like for Roman Strój, the image of the liberation his memory has preserved is very telling. It is very much

299 The estimations say that out of some 100,000 victims of Mauthausen, the camp and its subcamps, ca. 45,000 lost their lives between the winter of 1944 and May 1945.

different from the kind of image the former inmates tend to evoke in their written reminiscences and oral accounts (including the contributions to our documentary project).

But there was a moment when the Americans, I mean, the Poles³⁰⁰, rode into Mauthausen the first, on those armoured cars. But, as they say, when they caught sight of that pile, as the main gate of Mauthausen goes, and as you look, just, straight ahead, then it's just that the pile of those skeletons was there, straight ahead. That was around, just to be exact, a hundred, two hundred, three hundred, well, four hundred metres. Maximum. As they say, when they saw that pile of those skeletons, then they curled a U-turn, with those cars, and, whizz! – down the hill they drove. They didn't even want to drive in, and look at that. And so, an American group of the Red Cross went along only later. 'Cause there were the cars, and they had, like, the signs, right? It was only them that started taking, like, a closer interest in all that, and segregating all that. 'You go in here, you go in here, the *Muselmanns*.' The *Muselmanns* are such that, by the skin of their teeth, well, the living dead. Not dead as yet, but he could be so in an hour. Then, in any case, those American Red-Cross soldiers, [took] some care...

Instead of a strongly fixed image featuring a U.S. Army tank crossing the camp gate and setting the prisoners free, Roman has not ceased to see around himself the piles of human carcasses, or skeletons, in the first place. There is almost nothing we can learn about what happened about him at that moment. Well, not quite nothing: he must have been in one of those groups being 'segregated'. He was probably too weak to enter any activity, to embark on anything on his own, as many of his camp mates did. He was even perhaps too weak to grasp the situation; hence, he recalls the story of a U.S. team turning back as the one he has heard of ("As they say..."). They indeed entered and, moments later, exited from the camp area, but probably not because they took fright at seeing the quantities of dead bodies. The soldiers who appeared there ahead of the others, drove into in order to symbolically liberate the camp. Only those who followed were tasked with bringing help to the survivors.

The liberation did not completely alter my Interviewee's situation. Although his life was not put under direct threat, he remained completely depended on the others: he is one of those infirm, sick, and very young inmates who had to wait until a decision was made with regards to him and his peers. On waiting for such decision with respect to himself, Roman is watching the others who are sharing his situation – particularly, the Russians, probably inhabiting the same block. The image he has saved in his memory, though, is not exclusively built of the observations made just after the liberation. Part of this image is, also, the later-date knowledge on what eventually happened to those people and, even more so, the

300 What he actually means is the Americans of Polish descent who served with the U.S. units liberating the camp. Those Polish Americans reappear in a number of reports.

conviction about what they might have encountered in their own country.³⁰¹ The later knowledge and beliefs have formed a filter through which my Interviewee transmits the situation he observed at that moment.

They started to segregate that. Those people. Some here, some there. And, well? Aha, the Poles, separately, the *Russkis*, separately. With regards to the Russian group, that group was probably the largest group, they were quickly done in by those Russian *komandirs* [commanders]. Forthwith. Meaning, they wouldn't be shooting, no. They took it, 'You're going to go to your families [prob., 'to the *rodina*' = 'to your homeland'; the word Mr R.S. uses, *rodzina*, means 'family' in Polish (Transl. note)], to your country.' They set up the carriages, they arranged for... // Those Russian *komandirs* arranged for it with the occupation authority. Those railway carriages drew up, the cattle cars, and all those *Russkis* were loaded up, and, to the family [*resp.*, homeland]. 'To Russia will you go.' Then, reportedly, there, those who twigged what was on, as the mission was that they'd go to Russia, apparently, but won't see their home Russia. Because, straight away, somewhere to Siberia or someplace else, wherever. So, such was Stalin's policy, like that. Eradicate all those who have surrendered to the Germans, and so on. And, exactly, that farewell with the Russians was such as if everyone sensed that there was something amiss. That they, // that we won't see them anymore, as they call it.

The situation of the Russians – the *Russkis*, as my Interviewee and the other inmates have named them – was probably quite special. The narrator juxtaposes the image of this group against the reminiscence of the Poles: not some specific Polish inmates but Polish inmates in general. He employs generalisations and strongly reaffirms his own conviction about how big are the differences identifiable between us and them.

The Yugoslavians, the Poles, who else then?, then again, whoever wanted. It wasn't said that... There were those liaison officers, but they wouldn't go like a lout, unlike the *Russkis*. The *Russkis* instantly isolated the [other] *Russkis*, and *davai* [Russ., 'go on/ahead', 'do it']! And here, it was like this: an officer came along from that PRP-ian Poland³⁰², and, well, he was talking of the advantages, of this, of that, like, 'you come over', this-that. But that was not by force. That was not enforced, like, let's say, that you ought to, now, stay, and you're going now. Therefore, we ended up, the Americans carried us from Mauthausen, us the Poles, those, I think, who so wanted. I don't know; I didn't want to. To a former German camp. That is, it was a military camp, well, how

301 Some examples of the repressive measures suffered by such former prisoners after their return to the USSR can be found, for instance, in the aforesaid video report by Konstantin A. Shilov; fragments thereof are available on the Mauthausen Memorial Site website: <http://www.mauthausen-memorial.org>.

302 'PRP' standing for 'People's Republic of Poland' ('PRL' in Polish, with its derivative adjectival forms used a great deal) [Transl. note.]. This mental shortcut is worth noting: formally, the PRP/PRL was proclaimed only with the 1952 Constitution.

to say it, military barracks. But the American UNRRA made, the American UNRRA made the UNRRA camps out of those barracks, in which there were grouped those very nations, as I'm saying: Yugoslavians, Poles, and, like, some others... Slavonic people, in any case.

Not just the very words but the way they are uttered reinforces the opposition. The Russians are addressed harshly, '*davai!*', whilst the Poles, softly: 'of the advantages, of this, of that'. The selection did not extend to everyone. Many of them were in a physical condition that called for immediate medical assistance, in case it was not too late for it. Such people were transported to the transit camps and, once there, to hospitals. My Interviewee is hesitant in qualifying these experiences; he finally interprets them in free choice terms: "those, I think, who so wanted. I don't know; I didn't want to".

Here is where a whole series of images from the period between the liberation and the return to Poland – related to his stay in hospitals, transit camps, the early days of his education at the Polish school organised there, etc. This marks a different phase of his biography yet. As he resumed his health, the trajectory experience is fading, gradually, with elements of other biographical schemes cropping up – in particular, institutional patterns (botched up hastily, under those circumstances). This new situation is reflected in the way this autobiography is constructed. The central character in this narrative is no more completely passive or expecting assistance from the others. He has a say in what goes on with/about him, and where he is. In any case, the narrator assigns such influential power to him. Still, he is continually a very young man who has not ceased being afflicted after his stay in the *kacet*. Hence, he needs being treated, healed, and cared about. This severely restricts the room for making real choices, limits his self-reliance, renders him dependent upon the others – his subsequent biographical carers. At the first point at that stage, Catholic nuns and other patients, former prisoners, acted as such:

To that camp, in this Regensburg. And there was Polish care [in operation] already, Polish nuns, who [were] in the hospital, because there was, such, a hospital on the spot. I got into that hospital. For I was in a condition that, apparently, I qualified for it. ... There, in Regensburg, I should think I stayed rather long, I mean, maybe that was a month, maybe a month and a half. In any case, I was several months in the hospital. I improved myself [i.e. had my health improved] a little... Aha, and when from Regensburg, // I did not arrive in Poland yet, but was wandering around this Germany, and, among others, with, such, elderly people there, also from the camp, we went from Regensburg to... Würzburg. And there was also a camp, of the same kind as the one in Regensburg. And there was I too, but for a short time.

And from this Würzburg, I again got to a hospital. // Lohr am Main. ... And there, in that hospital in Lohr, there had been some SS-men [i.e. during the war (PF's note)]. And those nuns who had their tiny nunnery there attended on those Germans. So, it was not quite tasty for them, of those our *Häftlings*. Because there prevalently were, most of them, some ninety percent of those *Häftlings* were there. Well, but

I should admit that, that they fulfilled their conventual role. That, all the same, in spite that it was evident that it was not what those SS-men previously... Because that American occupation, this was already under the American occupation authority, so there would've been no SS-men anymore. And we were all the same treated by those nuns normally, the way that there was all, to the extent that there was a dying Pole, then a nun, from there, that one... stayed with him all the night. And she nursed him, and was wiping his mouth. So, you couldn't resent them at all, whatsoever. Their conduct was splendid, as if those were Germans really. Because they were German women, right?

And, well, out of that Lohr when I got, I then found myself in Schweinfurt. Schweinfurt, also, like, a town. *Schwein* means 'swine'.³⁰³ And, a camp like that one, too. Former German barracks. And, from that Schweinfurt, I found myself in the town of Wetzlar. But that was at the very end. Because before Wetzlar, there was, still, Gießen. Gießen – a military camp, of a sort, too. Those camps everywhere [*laughs*], for only there was a chance for a normal life. Well, you had a place to sleep and something to eat, and all for free, and so forth. And all that the UNRRA had [i.e. was owned/managed by UNRRA]. And it was only from Gießen that I went on to Wetzlar.

The first weeks, or perhaps months, after the liberation marked for Roman a period of ailment, treatment in various hospitals, stays at transit camps... Yet, as contrasted with the memory of the most recently suffered (and just-told) camp experiences, the reminiscence of his illness is not perceived by the Interviewee in terms of suffering, pain, helplessness.³⁰⁴ We only learn of his health indirectly, based on the medical diagnosis he refers to: "For I was in a condition that, apparently, I qualified for it", together with the fact that he received treatment from several hospitals. He was a solicitous patient there. His hospital observations are positive: juxtaposed with the concentration camp, the hospital and the transit camp appeared to offer "a chance for a normal life".³⁰⁵ The threshold of 'normality' was not set too high then: "a place to sleep and something to eat, and all for free".

303 The German city's name Schweinfurt is formed of two words, *Schwein* + *Furt*, literally meaning 'swine, pig' and 'ford', respectively.

304 This is worth noting, as A. Strauss's classical concept of trajectory relates it, exactly, with the experience of (a) sickness and dying. Cf. A. Rokuszewska-Pawelek, op. cit., pp. 71 ff.

305 For many an inmate – also those youngest, from the Warsaw transports – remaining enclosed after the liberation wherever, including in a transit camp, was mostly a continuation of the 'abnormal', rather than a beginning of a 'normal', life: "And later, ... I think we were together for three days, and at some moment Stefan and Marian went out, got to know that the camp was there: 'Well, then, let's go there, shall we'. They're back then on: 'Lads, let's go there, it's quite all right there'. I said, 'I'm not going, for God's sake. I'm not going there, lads, I don't want to go to any camp, I don't want to be in a herd, I don't want that, simply'. And I remained with those two *Muselmans* and with that sickly Edek."; account of Henryk Nowicki,

Rather than talking of his post-war wanderings about the camps and hospitals, of the impossibility to return to Poland (and, primarily, too bad health for that), Mr Strój mentions his “wandering around... Germany”. Such a perspective of describing his own experiences makes them closer to the experiences and adventures of those camp mates who, having taken a greater advantage of the regained freedom, were indeed ‘wandering around’ Germany (or Austria). He thus emphasises that his situation changed radically: he is no more a prisoner; he is a free man.

The hospital interactions observed by my Interviewee in Lohr has been included in the story, together with a commentary which stops the incidental, or even-based, current of the story. There is no commentary to stop the course of the narration when he mentions the Polish nuns attending on the patients at the Regensburg hospital. They just are there, and their presence is an obvious thing to the narrator. There is no need to explain where they had come from: the narrative simply goes on. It is different when the nuns in another hospital appear to German – moreover, they appear to have tended SS-men patients before. For a sick prisoner who has just left the concentration camp (and has experienced it the way he did), combination of these (contradicting) roles in a single person causes a dissonance. There is a need to come to a halt and interpret the situation so as to add the whole experience an autobiographical meaning.

This does not come easily: the test to pass is really difficult, for he sees those nuns primarily as German women who ‘attended on’ the Germans, the SS-men, and now would take care about us, the sick prisoners, ‘Slavs’. The latter project on the nuns their own strong fears, imputing them with a dislike toward them: “it was not quite tasty for them, of those our *Häftlings*”; judging from the nuns’ behaviour, they recognise that they would prefer to tend their compatriots instead: “it was evident that it was not what those SS-men previously...”. In reality, there had been no SS-men then for quite long; the prisoners did not meet any, the two groups missed each other. So, what was their comparison based on? Well, they did not have to make any comparisons really – it sufficed that they coincidentally came across some women ready to extend their care to them whilst they were identified by them as Germans. The other definitions were consequent and secondary, in fact.

The sisters have successfully passed that tough test before the prisoners, with an excellent mark. They redeem their Germanness, as initially ascribed to them, with their ‘splendid conduct’. The prisoners redefine the situation. The women looking after them now turn into, primarily, nuns – the attendants who “I should admit that, that they fulfilled their conventual role”. The image of a nun keeping watch by a dying Polish prisoner all night long is the most important moment in this reminiscence – one that abolishes the dissonance and adds meaning to the entire experience. For Roman, it is not an ordinary hospital interaction, an instance of tending a patient. It is a scene of redemption of guilt, uncovering a man under

the mask imposed on her (by the narrator): the mask (or, attached alien face) of a German. This reminiscence activates stronger emotion. Not quite visible in the script, this emotion grows quite audible as the narrator eagerly emphasises that the vigil lasted ‘all the night’.

Again, this recollection of moving, ‘wandering’, around Germany³⁰⁶ is non-historical, to a considerable degree – similarly to many other fragments of this autobiography. The story’s character, then aged sixteen, seventeen, transported several times from one camp to another, from one hospital to another – all those venues resembling one another – was losing a sense of time. Perhaps he has not even developed such a sense for himself: before his imprisonment, he was a kid; while in the *kaczet*, the others measured the time for him. Never before has he written down or recorded, set in an order or crystallised into a narrative, any of the experiences he is now evoking in our talk. They have been functioning as casual images, and it did not matter for him how long he stayed in any of the consecutive camps, or hospital. He has never endeavoured to render his awareness more accurate, as there has been no need.

Somewhat easier to remember, more easily discernible, were the names of the towns being homes to the camps/hospitals. He can remember them well, although the sequence of his visits can only be reconstructed after a moment of consideration – which does not come easily. It cannot come easy, since the experience was one of ‘wandering around’, rather than following a deliberate itinerary.

Among the reminiscences of that hospital-and-camp stage of this biography, there is one more essential episode appearing. What I mean is a close-up on a dialogue of two former *Lager* inmates, now using two hospital beds next to each other. This dialogue would be incomprehensible without a broader context, and this context calls for a background structure: certain events from the earlier stages of the biography, now turning important, are being recalled for the first time.

‘Cause, as we were in that camp, you know, // as we arrived from Warsaw to the camp, to Mauthausen, and later.... Then, as you talked to those elder *Häftlings* who’d been there a year, or two, or three, then, I... // In Schwechat, for example, when I arrived in Schwechat, then I look and see that the company there are elder, I say, ‘Sir’. And he says that, ‘You’re from Warsaw, I guess?’. I say, ‘Why?’. ‘Well, where’s that *Sir* from, what d’you mean: *Sir*? There’s nought of a *Sir* in here. We’re all equal, remember it, squirt.’ Because then I was still fifteen years and a half, about to be sixteen. In any case, they disaccustomed us to say ‘Sir’. There was no ‘Sir’ thing. And, there’s an interesting story. I am in that hospital in Regensburg, already in that liberated one,

306 In fact, all the localities named by the Interlocutor (Regensburg, Würzburg, Lohr, Gießen, Wetzlar, Mannheim) are located relatively close to one another, in central Germany (northern Bavaria and Hessen, northern Baden-Württemberg). Immediately after World War II, they were all covered by the U.S. Occupation Zone. The Americans set up large transit camps for the Displaced Persons (DPs) – former prisoners, coerced labourers, and refugees.

under the American occupation, and, well, we are all operating like in the camp. On first-name terms, all, yeah? And there was such one, I don't know who that was; a rather elderly guy, in any case. And says he, 'Ye snot, sod off with your familiar *you*. Just say: Sir, Michał, or, Mister, whatever, Kozłowski.' And I'm saying, 'Sir, I would call you *Sir* or *Mister* myself, wouldn't I, but I was told not to say it. [*laughs*] 'Cause I am a prisoner of the camp. Consequently, what is it that you want from me?'. And he says, 'What has been is over, and what is now is reality. It's freedom now, and now, squirt, 'Sir' has remained.' Well, it's just to mention it. That what it was like.

Although Roman recalls these two short scenes as curiosities, of a sort, "just to mention" them aside of his report, let us take a closer look at them for a while. They namely shed a good light on a certain important aspect of in-camp social relationships.

The new-coming prisoner is not aware of the rules of the game, or rather, the games that were taking place in parallel there. He is brutally introduced to the official game at the very beginning by the SS crew managing the camp and supported by a number of *kapos* and some other functional persons. He is taught the rules of a secret game, an alternative life³⁰⁷, by the senior and more experienced inmates, in the first place. Both lessons are equal in importance – the latter one would even be more important, should increase survival potential be the measurement of its importance. Among the rules to master are 'trivialities' such as the way the inmates address one another. This informality must have been important for them, if they stressed it so much. It cut the social distance short, rendering the people closer to one another regardless of the diverse roles they had played, and positions held in the social hierarchy, in their earlier lives. A suspension of those pre-camp distinctions could reinforce the immediate bonds of 'then and there', at least to a small extent. And, it probably gave the simplest reply to the depersonalisation applied at the entrance, the moment they arrived at the camp.

A young Varsovian arriving at the camp at the last phase of its existence (it was probably the worst of the phases) has little opportunity gain a command of the rules of the in-camp game as good as the prisoners with a few years of seniority had done. He has to make up for his backlogs with their support – and so he does. Instructed pointedly at some point, he switches into friendly terms with the others – those with whom he can communicate at all.

He appears to be a diligent student who takes the camp lessons to heart. Quite much, if not too much – as he would not know that the rules he was taught are

307 The term *underlife* used in English-language literature is perhaps more suitable here: it is not so much about some 'other' life but a 'subcutaneous' or 'underground' current of the primary life. See: E. Goffman, *Asylums ...*, Chapter (essay) III: 'The Underlife of a Public Institution: A Study of Making Our in a Mental Hospital', pp. 171–321.

not relevant after the liberation; or, in fact, rather than having quit being objectively binding, they were subject to instant denouncement. Another inmate, the camp mate, companion, *kacet-/Lager*-man, Mauthausen-man now has the right to nullify the in-camp interaction rules (“What has been is over, and what is now is reality”) and demand that the suspended order be reinstated. This symbolic order, in fact, builds on its presumptive existence and validity (the camp situation marked a departure from it – not the other way round); it thus suffices for just one partner of this interaction to refer to it, so the other(s) will respect it. Especially if that ‘other’ one is a teenage ailing and infirm ‘squirt’, laid on a hospital bed. However, the other prisoner’s demand to address him ‘sir’, suitably with the age (difference), has so firmly stuck in Roman’s mind also because it strongly contrasts with his ongoing experience of contacts with the other former Mauthausen inmates, today’s Club members. These contacts are direct, informal, often friendly. The former prisoners are camp mates to one another at the reunions. Although they had not met at the camp, their shared experience of stay in the *kacet* is the foundation of their specific communication code. This code is obviously unidentifiable when we look at this milieu through the memorising rituals they cultivate; it clearly surfaces as soon as we gain insight into the less ceremonial communication practices characteristic of the ordinary, working meetings of former concentration camp inmates.³⁰⁸

This transitory stage of Roman’s biography, between the camp and his return to Poland, one more experience, so far completely absent, appears. He resumed his education while still at the Wetzlar transit camp – the one he stayed at longest, probably for a dozen or so months (it being difficult to find how long exactly):

Because that was at the very end, before the departure. For there were // representatives of Polish intelligentsia coming out of the AK [Home Army], they created there a gymnasium [i.e. junior high school] and a lyceum [grammar school] for young people. And, some lad said to me; he says, ‘You old boy, don’t you creep across these camps here, just go to Wetzlar, ’cause there’s a Polish school, regular, there. You’ll go to school.’ And yes indeed. And there I completed, I think, a year and a half. Well, ’cause, you know, because I don’t know what it was like there; in any case... I definitely have

308 A number of former camp prisoners clearly appreciate the unique character of social relationships and communication codes between them and their former camp mates: “That was, at all, some peculiar experience, incomparable to any other occurrence in the life, a herd of colleagues perished there, and [there is] some, somehow, inner obligation toward those, so, as we meet these colleagues, then you feel no difference, I cannot feel that at all, but all the colleagues, as I can see, but none of financial, intellectual status, education, no – this is simply a mate from the camp. And even many such whom I can’t remember even if in the camp, but the very fact that he’s been through it, that he saw the same things...”; account of Stanisław Leszczyński, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_031.

this ID somewhere here, damn it... I've got it somewhere here but would have to look for it. Damn... I would've... I mean, I've got a certificate, like, that I attended, one-and-a-half of gymnasium. Meaning, form one and two. Two forms of a gymnasium, let this be so.

My Interviewee's autobiographical memory has lost a lot of his eighteen months education at the local gymnasium. The effort he is making to find a school certificate hinders the effort of his memory. The very document could possibly help evoke some specific images, but his focus on the searching adds to distracting his attention from the story he is telling. In this recollection – or rather, a note in the memory, recording the occurrence of such biographical episode – there appears a significant figure of the anonymous 'lad' Roman had met earlier somewhere else. It is this man's advice/suggestion/instruction (the sentence constructed in the narrator's memory by no means accurately repeats the actually uttered words) that Roman's 'wandering around' turns into a linear process of school education at the transit camp. This sets his experiences in an order along the time axis. The very next experience is his return to Poland:

And, anything up there yet? // Aha, when I completed that school that one-year-and-a-half of the gymnasium, then, well... // From this Wetzlar... What happened with that Wetzlar? Ah, right. Then, I found myself in Mannheim. Mannheim, there is a... // there was a camp, there were barracks there too, the only thing being that there was a training camp, already, for the Poles, and not only for the Poles. For all those from the East: Latvians, Estonians, Ukrainians, I think, also, there. In Mannheim, was a camp, you know... What was it called, just a moment... So to put it... Blow me down... Well, the memory takes a beating... Guard companies. Right! Mannheim, the guard companies. And I was for a rather short time there, I'm not telling exactly you how long; in any case, I came over to Poland from there. From Mannheim; they brought the carriages along for us. And here, as you can make out, they write 'Kotzbuch' here, or something of the sort. I don't know, maybe this Kotzbuch thing was there, some sort of, on the way. But maybe that's some transmission station. Because we were taken from Mannheim. Taken home already.

Memory is indeed playing a trick on my Interviewee at this moment. He attempts to develop a coherent story, taking into account all the biographical events he considers of essence – those he would not consider essential are missing in this narration. But he is getting problems with filling some of them with relevant content. Just the framing has remained, checkable against the documents: the name of the last German town housing a 'training camp' he temporarily stayed at; the name of some station en route, which refers to nothing specific. Although Roman has lost access to the memory of certain experiences, he has never lost his awareness that he once had this memory, and that it was of importance for him. This is a tough moment. It would perhaps have been easier if he had once (re)constructed this story, be it as an oral account. Then, the previous reconstructions could have been built upon, rather than straining the memory to make it reach for the experiences as such.

There is, however, one experience that reenlivens my Interviewee's memory. It precedes his return to Poland, provides the context for it, and makes the reminiscences follow the expressive images that are crucial for this biography. These images enable the speaker to regain control over the narration he is producing.

For I came forward by myself. Because some unpleasant scenes, sort of, started taking place later. For instance, the Americans were of various origins: German, such one, such other one, and so forth. Well, the way they handled the Poles was unpleasant. In the first phase, it was all OK, and then began breaking down. ... And then Americans were more over visiting Poland here, the Bierut's Poland, and were reassured that Poland guarantees everything. And they came with such mission back to the U.S. occupation [zone]. And there were meetings, like, right? And they were saying, 'To Poland, go! There's nothing you could do in here, this is not your country.' In spite of this, three hundred thousand Poles stayed there. After the war, three hundred thousand Poles stayed at the occupations [i.e. Occupation Zones]: English ones [*sic*], French, and American one. But those who made up their minds, like me, we then came over. Once the AK-men arrived before me, those who were on [= held] various functions, at the rank of major, and he'd also go to Poland, having no fear? Then, was I to fear? I was a private. Who would've even guessed, would they, that I was with the AK? Given the situation, as I said [i.e. described it] then, what I said was, well, 'I'm going!' Ah, and I moreover wrote a letter, via the Red Cross, and my family responded. My mother and my sisters: 'We are there'. ... In Bielany [an area in northern Warsaw, part of the borough of Żoliborz (Transl. note)], here in Żoliborz; then I'm saying [to myself], 'Where am I to go? Looking for luck [someplace else], while having a family here, in Warsaw?' Warsaw was all debris, that's another thing. But, it was there. But, Żoliborz still stood.

Known to us from the other reports, this is an image of a biographical crossroads at which the former camp inmates arrived, trying to make up their minds on whether to come back to Poland. The split-up of the two possible paths begins appearing much clearer; the choice, no more a spontaneous emotional response, probably becomes tougher. More is known and hence, there are more 'pros' and 'cons' calling for being taken into consideration. Beside a knowledge on the situation in Poland, there is an extra factor that appears where they are right now: those running the transit camp incite its residents to leave; the site had been devised as a transit camp, after all. For my Interviewee, unlike moments ago, it has ceased to be an opportunity for a 'normal life'.

Roman Strój describes his decision to return to Poland in terms of reasonable calculation. His involvement in conspiratorial activity with the Home Army is calculated the most carefully. What sometime earlier and elsewhere, in 1944 in Warsaw, was an incidental choice – a decision to simply join one of the friends – now turns out to be of key importance, as it is stigmatised by the new Polish authorities that have a power at their disposal and can impose and enforce their own definitions. Stigmatisation by the authorities is gradable and, according to

what was known at the time, in direct ratio to the engagement or, looking from the opposite perspective, to 'having had a hand' in the affairs. The degree of involvement has to somehow be determined, which is a difficult exercise if applied to each instance separately. The easiest solution was to simply relate it a priori to the military rank with the AK: the higher the rank, the worse for its holder today; hence, there are such who ought to really worry, some others should be worried much less, others still – just a little bit. Once those first mentioned, the top risk group, resolved to come back to Poland, this should probably mean that there is no menace to a private, especially if one is like Roman: unverifiable, enlisted casually. Such was the recognition of the situation by my Interviewee then – or, at least, such is the image of this recognition he constructs today.

He must have been intensively preoccupied with this calculation; it is around it that he has spun the reminiscence of his return to Poland. The other justification: entering into contact with his mother and sisters who have survived the war and are waiting in the Warsaw district of Żoliborz ('still standing'), is mentioned as a trailer, as if coincidentally. The text record would indicate that this incentive was secondary; the sound recording would not reassure this conclusion. Perhaps the yearning for his relatives and for 'his own' Warsaw was equally important as those calculations; but this is not easy to render, particularly if you are a man. He finds it easier instead to recount the occasion-related, or external, so to speak, layer of life experiences.

The following account definitely follows this particular track. It becomes merely an epitome where the post-war experiences (filling, after all, a major part of the life, in quantitative terms) get boiled down to a mere few sentences:

[RS:] And, well, just from this very Mannheim, via that Kotzbuch, Hotzbuch, or whatever its name is at all, I arrived in Poland. And, well? And I started... // Which year it was? Forty-seven? In forty-seven did I arrive. But in any case, some, of the sort, maybe, half a year maybe, or something, perhaps, I sat for a while and got enrolled with the mechanical gymnasium and lyceum. Here, in Warsaw, the Traugutt Park. Well, and I completed that gymnasium and lyceum. And, well, to the work. And, later on, just like that. Here am I working, there am I working... If [you] want, I can [tell] you...

[PF:] Yes, go ahead, please.

[RS:] Well, then, after that gymnasium, I worked for the Light Industry Design Office. ... Later on, from that Office, as I finished... The time-period of my work, that is hard for me to tell here now. Not a whole year, for certain. Later on, from that Office... Aha, from the Office, I worked for rather long in WSK Okęcie. The Okęcie Communication Equipment Manufactory. And there I worked, I should think, for some ten years. And, from Okęcie WSK [sic], I moved officially to the Ministry of Mechanical Industry. Because such ones, young ones, were in need there. And, from the Ministry of Mechanical Industry, to the Union of Industry – one grade lower, then – to the Union of Pharmaceutical and Medical Industry. In Warsaw. And that marked the end of a professional career.

No images of the trip to Poland, arrival in Warsaw, or greeting by his family. The unconstrained narration has completely lost its earlier rhythm, getting bogged down in the bare names of his subsequent employers, finally coming to a halt – at the last point of this lapidary professional resume.

How to explain this switch? Quitting the labour of memory, the building of follow-up narration, the tackling of biographical details? Continuation of the story is definitely hindered by my Interviewee's tiredness. He's been telling his story for more than an hour now; it is hot in his apartment; the noise made by a drilling machine coming out of an adjacent flat has been bothering us for some time now. A moment earlier, Roman's wife was back from her shopping. She has now brought us coffee and cookies ("Please help yourself..."). This has added to our deteriorated concentration. But it seems these only are extra hindrances: normally, such impediments are surmounted easily and unnoticeably if the story flows swiftly on.

The crucial thing is, apparently, the Interviewee's conviction that his history came to an end with the end of the war – including, perhaps, his stay at the transit camps; or, in any case, the part of this history he considers suitable for an autobiographical story. Its background is formed of important and distinct events and historical processes: the Occupation, Warsaw Uprising, concentration camps. It is of no relevance that the background proved blurred and unfocused in a number of moments, making the narrative non-historical. Important is the awareness that such a background exists. Hence, my request that he tell a limitless story of his life, gives way to my Interviewee's conviction that, once we are recording an interview within an international project documenting the lives of Mauthausen inmates, the story's focus should be the camp experience (and, the one from just before then and from shortly afterwards). And this is what he sticks by.

There is one more – a deeper, to my mind – dimension to this end of an individual history. Career is the central experience of the post-war phase of Roman Strój's biography. He namely performed office work at a subordinate position with State-run institutions – primarily, so-called industrial unions, the sites being almost symbolic to the centrally controlled economy in what was the People's Republic of Poland. His brief listing of the main stages of this career bears traces of the language used at that time. My Interviewee uses this language as it is the only one he can use to relate that particular experience. This language is moreover part of that experience. The very names of his workplaces, plain for the narrator and requiring no comment, sound rather weird today and not quite seem to be ringing a bell, particularly for a young reader. Whilst these names stand out, the few sentences the narrator has just uttered bear the recorded more subtle traces of immersion in that specific language: "I moved officially", "[the] young ... were in need", "one grade lower". Immersion in the language implies the way the world is seen and experienced, the two facets being inseparable. The descriptions he uses denote an inertness, torpidity of this career, passiveness of the narrator. Career means, in this case, top-down, externally controlled 'official' shifts 'between the grades', or levels, based on the structure's needs. Thus, career was not what we would be inclined to associate it with today: self-development, moving upward in

social hierarchies, and making use of one's talents. It is not conditional, in the first place, on the individual's activity, resourcefulness, diligence and industry.

We do not learn anything essential about the work Mr Strój performed in those institutions or establishments over a few dozen years. Not only because he considers this detail irrelevant: he cannot really describe this labour in any specific terms, somehow recount it. Pointing to the institutions he was employed with distracts the attention – the narrator's attention too – from the vagueness of the career experience in this autobiographical memory. A similar manner of evoking the career in the communist Poland is characteristic of a high number of former camp inmates' accounts, for those who once worked for State-owned institutions on subordinate, or thoroughly second-rate, positions. The experience of such work turns blurred in their autobiographical memory, losing the focus, eluding the narration. It is as if all those Unions, 'Central Boards', Ministries, etc., used to suck the people into their monotonous current, causing a biographical drift, of which we cannot say much today apart from the fact that it appeared.³⁰⁹

The short passage on Roman Strój's passive career concludes the first part of his account: free narrative. There is no coda, punchline, summarising afterthought that he offers. He simply stops at this point and waits for my questions. So, we smoothly pass on to the next phase of the interview. I feel supported by the conviction, possibly shared by my Interviewee to an extent, that we will make this story complete with the help of my questions.

The second part of this interview does not succeed in observing the chronology of memories in line with the chronology of the events being evoked. My Interviewee follows the associations cropping up in his mind as he answers my questions. I am not going to tame this labour of memory. I prefer to accompany it, as far and as long as I can; the result is that also my questions are losing the chronology as they try to follow what the narrator's memory has just evoked. In analysing this part of the account, the sequence of images matters less, and consistent tracing of their sequence would extremely hinder the grasping of the story as a whole, also in view of the reader. In order to facilitate the perception, I will try and furnish the relevant fragment of my analysis with an order of its own, which only partly accurately renders the sequence of the narrative.

The beginning of this more interactive part of the interview is not easy. What has so far been completely neglected in the narrative is not easily recallable now with questions. This concerns especially Roman's post-war family life, about which I am trying to get to know, anything, in the first place. This deficit draws my attention in particular; yet, instead of any vivid memories evoked in respect of that experience, I can only hear the laconic sentence:

309 It is easy to see the difference between the blurred reminiscences of a work of this sort and the clear and detailed experience of e.g. a teacher, doctor, professor or, perhaps even more so, private entrepreneur (functioning in the circumstances of post-war Poland).

And, the family... In 1954, I got married. Well, and: one son was born in fifty-five, and the other one in fifty-six. So, the family... Some have two kids, some others, three. Well, and we [are] on our own.

All is taking place in its regular and ordinary manner: marriage, the first kid, second, the grandchildren. Not much to recount, really. There is nothing out of the ordinary in that he and his wife have now remained on their own, the major tasks in their lives having been fulfilled. The last short sentence is uttered without a tone of regret or pretence toward the children, in terms that the parents are alone now, and should perhaps be cared for by them instead. The situation is as it is, this is the order of things, a natural course of human life, full-stop.

An equally summary answer is given, it turns out, to my attempt to get to know more of his life as a pensioner. My Interviewee evades building a narration on his experiences from the last twenty-five years. Instead, he has focused on finding when he ceased working. The memory cannot help find the details, so we refer to the documents. A moment later, we successfully find the date of this essential biographical change: "I worked in the Union in the year 1980. Must've been something of the sort". Although the date is the least interesting detail for me, I cannot learn more – at least for the time being.

Having sought assistance with the documents prompted to me by Roman, I notice that the dates of his imprisonment in Pruszków and, later on, in Auschwitz and Mauthausen detailed in them are not in compliance with those he quoted as part of his random narrative. Rectifying such inaccuracies with the help of the Interviewee is a regular procedure in biographical interviewing, particularly if the recording is put in the archive to become a peculiar, though rightful, historical source. The point is not even to gain certainty as to the detailed dating – or, by no means, to point out to the errors. The purpose is, rather, to stimulate the memory, helping it reach for the once-evoked experiences along a path different than the one already paved.

[PF:] I'd have another question. Here in the documents, it is written that the departure for Mauthausen was on 20th September, not August. That's September.

[RS:] Oh, that's possible. I'm really sorry. Because I said, some two weeks, but that... This is what's important [*pointing to the document*]. 'Cause this tells us everything. On this document everything else is based. And, to Auschwitz, it's also written here: the thirteenth... September? Serious?

[PF:] Yes. Maybe there's an error?

[RS:] No, impossible, there couldn't be any error. Well, then, I am sorry, in that case. Then, in accord with that... // September's there, and September's here too. And, in my case... It means that I must have been longer in that transit camp in Pruszków. Not two weeks, as I have said. But I was there for a longer time, till it caught September. And, from Pruszków, on that September, September thirteenth, right? Well, then. I ended up in Auschwitz on the thirteenth of September. Because we had only travelled for one night. ... And then all's in accord. On September the thirteenth, I found myself, from Pruszków, in Auschwitz.

The data contained in the Arolsen certificate is the ‘appeal instance’, the last resort for Roman. He believes this data reflects the reality: “this tells us everything”. He is aware that his memory tends to evoke images without precise historical footnotes, and now he treats his task very seriously and wants to give a reliable report. This is the reason why the rough autobiographical story he constructed a few dozen minutes ago needs being verified in this fragment, not only with respect to the dates. New recollections, concrete images absent earlier, are unveiled:

[RS:] These were factory floors, floors of those trains [RS refers to the transit camp in Pruszków (PF’s note)]. And you slept just like [unclear], what you had with you, some blanket or anything, then you’d get the blanket bundled up, stretched, there were no conditions there. There were conditions for waiting standing. That’s what I’d name it. The people did various things, well, ’cause they were laying some planks, what not, right? The family... For, the whole families [were there], the wife, the husband. Then, they had some, say, blankets or something, and then [placed them] under their heads, and they slept like that. Not like, the conditions in Pruszków, there were no conditions there. Nothing was prepared there, ’cause that was a transit camp, of those that, from the Uprising, further off into the world. So, do please rectify it. ... What I mean is, September the thirteenth, from Pruszków to Auschwitz, and later, the twentieth of September, right?

[PF:] Later on... Yes, September 20th, to Mauthausen.

[RS:] This is it, meaning, all’s correct. I mean, how long, there? That was thirteenth, and there, twenty-what?

[PF:] The twentieth. That is, seven days.

[RS:] Seven days, that’s what I just said.

[PF:] And there, in Auschwitz, was a quarantine, or...

[RS:] No, these were, such, numbered blocks. I was in block number two. That was a quarantine. That was a quarantine, the thing is, we were carrying some stones already then. There was a job to do then yet. I mean, it was not like, you’d get up and saunter around. The Germans did have it like that. Whatever [it was], you had to do something. And, on that occasion, there were situations you wouldn’t be ready to believe. For example, we had come over from the Warsaw Uprising to Auschwitz, meaning, from Pruszków, and that very Höss man; that very chief, chief, so to speak...

[PF:] Commandant.

[RS:] The Commandant of the Auschwitz camp. And well, he said to us that we didn’t ask you to [come] here, and so on, that it is our fault, that you had ventured on this combat yourselves, and what for, no one requested you to do it, and so on. And, overall, he – a saint man. Well, but that’s not bothering that he killed two men. Meaning, he set a dog. One, with a dog, and the other [was], like, a *kapo*, also a Hitlerite, SS-man. He kicked someone on the vitals or something, and two men in front of the building went into the ground, just like that. That’s what it was like. Such were the courses of events.

As it turns out, then, the trauma of the beginnings of the camp trajectory has made an imprint in his memory with images much more distinct that we could infer from the earlier fragments of this narrative. This is still a story on collective experience extending to a number of people who were transported to the camps in the course of the Warsaw Uprising; while the individual trajectory perishes, melts in this crowd, the concrete things and details, observed at that time, have not perished. This is true also for the symbolic scene of greeting at Auschwitz by the camp commander. A similar image – featuring the figure of an SS-man, the commandant³¹⁰ in most cases, less frequently a block-leader³¹¹ – reappears in a number of accounts. And, it is added a ‘Warsaw’ peculiarity now. The standard announcement that ‘the only way out is through the chimneystack’, meant to intensify the shock at the arrival, does not appear here. Instead, Roman quotes Rudolf Höss’s words about an error, guilt, and consequences of the Uprising, with which he greeted the new transport, as we can learn. The shock of the camp initiation is, however, no less acute, or perhaps even severer: the softer phrases are accompanied by a cruel slaying of two inmates.

Symptomatic for this narrative is that this expressive greeting scene – evoked, after all, by the attempt to determine the accurate dates of Roman’s stay in the individual camps – functions as an image detached from a concrete place. In this sense, it again proves non-historical. We are trying to determine this detail together, by looking it up in the document:

[PF:] Was that in the central camp of Auschwitz, or was it in Birkenau?

[RS:] What it says here is ‘Auschwitz- Birkenau’. Well, I can’t tell the difference between this Birkenau and... We entered that main gate, ‘*Arbeit Macht Frei*’. And there stood those barracks, and number 2, I was in number 2.

[PF:] And were they two-storey, these barracks?

No, one-storey. All that, on one... There were no other. But those brick ones, they were different. I was not in any of those brick ones. Maybe that’s this Birkenau. I was in a wooden one. Of red brick, then they could perhaps have some storeys there. But when it comes to our barracks, they were wooden, one-storey. The plank-beds were, clear. You know what it’s like. That, the ground-floor, // the centre.

310 “And then von Fritz, the camp’s commandant, came up and said in German: “Whatever you may think, there is only one exit for you: via the crematorium chimney””; account of Bogdan Wnętrzewski, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive, ref. no. ISFLDP_032 (recorded by Paweł Pięciak).

311 “As we were almost there in Auschwitz, then, as I’m looking, they punched for us those numbers, there, they were setting us ready for the block, as we came up to that block, and there, the block-leader, a Pole, says in Polish, are you aware where you are, this is Auschwitz-Birkenau, it’s a sanatorium, but the way out is through the chimneystack only. That’s how he greeted us. ‘*Arbeit macht frei*’. Immediately, there.”; account of Stanisław Wochal, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_062.

Three-level ones, such were inside the barrack, but the barracks were one-storey. Whereas here, where those bricks were, blocks made of red brick in Auschwitz, it could perhaps have been Birkenau, Auschwitz-Birkenau.

A rough story like this, not polished with the later-gained knowledge and multiple repetitions, remains more authentic. Roman, then fifteen years old, could indeed have had no idea of what camp he was at. A number of his camp mates, some of them young men, could have been similarly unaware of it. Most of them, however, made up for this backlog with their later knowledge which they have integrated with their camp experience. My Interviewee has never carried out such 'processing'.

With the help of my questions concerning the relationships between the prisoners on their way to the camp (first, to Auschwitz-Birkenau and then to Mauthausen), Roman evokes the subsequent camp experiences, trying to comment on them and generalise them:

[PF:] And, in this transport, were there those same people who before then had been going from Warsaw to Auschwitz, or were they some other ones then?

[RS:] No, those were others, partly yes, partly no. It was mixed.

[PF:] And, did you have there a friend or an acquaintance with whom, all that time...

[RS:] I had a colleague in Pruszków yet. To Pruszków, as we still were on our way, I didn't have any yet, for in Boernerowo I had no friends or mates. But there were some two persons, of a sort, and I knew them by sight. Later on, in Pruszków, I did meet, quite a lot, from Koło, from Obozowa [St.]. But this later got smashed up, 'cause one turned right, the other turned left... For those hangars of this State Rail are enormous, quite. There are the tracks, they're repairing them from below, those specialists. So, it is enormous there, suffice you talked with him, and he's not there anymore by tomorrow. Or else... Because there were moments, like, that some would escape. In the night especially, with the various arrangements behind. Because, for instance, the AK conspiracy, or some other organisations, arranged for a variety of smugglings. I wouldn't have the opportunity, but perhaps he had one. But, that was. Whereas in the camp itself, there might have been, damn it, but you wouldn't have [= pay] attention to it, 'cause you were driven by the whirl of those... of that time which did not take the humans into account. There was no possibility, or even willingness to share your time with some colleague, because that was burdensome. And even if, say, you were involved too much, because of some scruples, 'cause something whatever, and there was no time for it. That simply was unthinkable, for any bonds to be there.

This is a potent report on the way to the camp, focused, however, not on describing the way the group was making but instead, on the social relationships between the companions. A mere few days before these events, the young Roman's mates had been one of the central reference groups for him: he had spent most his time with them, roaming around the streets of Wola, doing conspiratorial business. Suddenly, he remains on his own, thrown into a situation that is completely alien

for him, and extremely dynamic too, so he cannot grasp or comprehend what is going on. No surprise that he evokes those occurrences as a violent destruction of the tissue of social relationships: closeness, friendship, support in the others. He takes effort to build new relationships but the structure, again, immediately falls into ruin, 'gets smashed up'. He remains on his own, with a sense of loneliness. He constructs quasi-general rules governing the motion of that steamy 'whirl', absorbing him and everyone around. In this subjective experience, the time, rather than passing slowly³¹², is 'driving' the humans, 'not taking them into account'; there is 'too little' of it for any scruples, bond-building, developing and keeping up human relationships.

The interpretation of human relationships at the concentration camp as proposed by Roman ought not to be surprising. Not quite because it has been reconfirmed by the other accounts – in some of them, yes indeed – but because it sheds light on his own camp trajectory: being chased away from one camp to another, switching several times to a new activity, labour done with international *Kommandos*, death march – all that did not favour the building or preservation of interpersonal ties. He must have been building some in order to survive – but was offered no chance for them to last longer and grow strong. When he met some men from Warsaw in a Schwechat barrack, he was taken moments after from there to another camp.

There were some talks – in Schwechat, with those mates. ... I certainly talked to many. But, how it was, what it was like... ... Because I, as is known, I was transferred from Schwechat to Mödling in connection with that sickness, and had the breakup of contact and bond with them too. And there were completely different people in Mödling. Completely alien to me.

Had those bonds appeared a greater deal, involving not only the Varsovians whose situation was similar to his own, and had they not been broken up so violently, Roman would have perhaps not needed permanent medical care after the liberation (and several weeks afterwards): he would have probably lived to see the liberation in much a better condition.

This part of our conversation resumes the moment of his arrival in Mauthausen in September 1944. Extremely brief in the unrestrained story – with only the second stay in Mauthausen, in April 1945, after the death march, was recounted in more detail – it now reappears as a clear image:

312 It is worth noting that the similar experiences from before the camp period and from inside the camp may lead to completely differing interpretations of time at the camp: "In the camp, I was imprisoned for 244 days. As they say, this period should be given in minutes or even in seconds, because the prisoner was threatened by death at every single second."; account of Jan-Ryszard Sempka, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_036.

This is, such a, permanent rule with the camps, any camp you can possibly figure out in the world, under the Hitlerites' custody. It goes like that: you arrive at the station, but without any luggage, which means that your luggage has stayed in Auschwitz. You're getting there [*unclear*] and the plate, with the number. And, you're done then. We're going to Mauthausen, get undressed in front of the *Waschraum*. The *Waschraum* – the *mikvah* and bath, compulsory, have any lice, or no lice, but you've got to get the bath. We're bathing, another thing is that these were the beginnings and the lice were there yet. In spite that you were some seven days in this Auschwitz only, but the lice were there yet. They cross over instantly. Well, and so: the *mikvah*, from the *mikvah* – to the barrack, on the double. There, there too, a line set up like at the roll-call. And, count off! How many there were ... must be in line with what has flown into the barracks. They have calculated all that and, well, now are receiving the rags in front of the door, well, from the cap up to that... Getting dressed. Boots or what, and inside you go. The *kapo*, that *Stubendienst*, shows you: you're placed there. You've been given a bowl, all those things and stuff you need, to live in the camp. And, well? That's it.

This scene is, again, constructed as a group experience, identical to all the newcoming inmates, all the *Zugangs*. It is moreover recalled hastily, to exemplify something obvious and well-known – the routine camp procedure that is applied not only at Mauthausen but in all the German *kacets*. There is not even a single sentence uttered which would suggest the narrator has his individual experience, what he has been through, in mind: he has again vanished in the crowd.

The following reminiscences render the earlier-enumerated stages of his camp route more specific. These stages are many and they last rather short, each having impressed some characteristic image or sign in my Interviewee's memory. For Roman, the quarry is the token of Mauthausen. The quarry was the first labour site encountered by almost all the new inmates. It triggered dismay, as intended by the SS (the surviving former inmates have preserved vivid reminiscences of it), forming the final stage of the camp initiation.

And later on, normally, every day, they then brought over those things I told you. That, either they'd push you down from the quarry into that, // into the precipice – for there, it was so that if those one-hundred-and-thirty steps which you walked from Mauthausen, from the quarry, one-hundred-and-thirty steps, then you climbed up the hill, and there was a wall. The thing is, it's a known thing that this path was somewhat remote from that abyss. But the abyss, water was there, 'cause, as is known, where there's a quarry, there's water too, yeah? Well, then there were moments that, let's say, not just that you've climbed up there with this stone, your last-ditch effort, then moreover... // Particularly, the Jews. I must point out here that it's the Jews who had, especially, that, // this tremendous privilege of martyrdom that they were thrown down. But they accepted that somewhat weirdly quietly, being Jews all the same. You could see it, couldn't you, that the Hitlerite would push him down. And he wouldn't believe till the end. He still thought he might save his life, that he'd squirm somehow still. He'd hide among us, shrink, this, the stone, that... And the S[S]-man walked up higher: '*Jude, komm hier!*'. Well, and that's what it was. But that's not just the Jews.

I could see it personally, especially that the SS-men had a fondness for the Jews. But nowhere is it said that the Poles, or the Gypsies, or whoever else, had any preferential treatment. Because, be you cheeky there, no matter, a small stone, or... // Because, for instance, everybody from the quarry, if he walked up there, then everybody... [had to carry a stone (PF's note)].

This reminiscence – generalised again, as if Roman were unable to recount his experience otherwise than by making it part of the fate of the camp prisoners at large – is something more, or perhaps even something different, than a simple footprint impressed by the camp. In fact, the memory does not reflect the past events but processes and interprets them. Such interpretation is dependent upon a number of current contexts – among other things, one's own convictions, cognitive patterns, collective memory within which the autobiographical memory functions, stereotypes, and so on. This fragment of Roman Strój's account is a good example of such creative labour of memory.

Evocation of the quarry is a permanent motif in the recollections and reports of former Mauthausen inmates, and in historical studies and guides for visitors to the former camp site. The quarry was situated in the camp's immediate vicinity, at the foot of a steep precipice; the site has for many years now been available to visitors of the Mauthausen Memorial Site. Former inmates are an important group of visitors. The quarry is a peculiar icon of this particular camp, its distinguishing mark, *differentia specifica*. Also for Roman Strój, who once worked there. The image he evokes draws not only on the labour but also, on the icon. For instance, the number of stair-steps the inmates climbed while carrying the stones, drooping; the steep from which SS-men at times threw the prisoners down. We do not know which details come from the narrator's own observation and which are based on the talks with the other club members, or are part of a generalised picture of the camp, which also appears in these rougher, not-quite-smoothened narrations. A minor error has sneaked in, by the way: my Interviewee gives the number of stairs, a fixed element of the icon, but the number he quotes is incorrect. This is not the major thing, though; once a number ought to be quoted, let it be there, even if not quite precise.³¹³

313 The actual number of stair-steps, as given in the guides, historical studies, and at the Mauthausen Memorial Site official website, is 186. The prisoners whose narrations are deeper embedded in the context of historical knowledge and collective memory on the camp, refer to this number, as a rule. Some interlocutors mention other numbers in their stories, whilst others only point to this symbol and refer us to sources more certain than their own memory: "Well, and, interestingly, those famous stairs in Mauthausen, 'cause such very famous, that were so enormous, whatever their size, I can't remember, this is in the archives, then there it's known... That, our first labour, once we were registered, given the stripped clothing, was the going, everyday going to the quarries, exactly up those notorious stairs, and you had to bring a stone, possibly a large one."; account of Janusz Bąkowski, available at

More important that this numerical detail is another fragment of the quarry reminiscence: murdering of the prisoners working there by throwing them down from the rocky precipice – especially, the Jews coerced to join the penal company. The SS crew jargon called the victims of this cruel play the *Fallschirmspringer* – ‘parachute jumpers’; the site where the crime was committed was the *Fallschirmspringerwand* – ‘jumpers’ rock’. This horrid image also reappears in the reminiscences of a number of former inmates who had worked in that very quarry³¹⁴; in Roman’s account, though, has a larger purpose than testifying to the crime he had eye-witnessed. The prisoners (or, perhaps, just one such prisoner) killed there are not merely victims of the crime. Since, apart from being inmates, they are Jewish, my Interviewee ascribes to them a number of traits he considers plainly related to being a Jew. Their deaths are a ‘privilege of martyrdom’, and offering they had been called to make, with no retreat, whereas they are not willing to believe in their destiny and are trying to evade their lot. They are ‘contriving’ something. The narrator is lowering his voice at this point, as if he wanted to stress that they were contriving, using some neat tricks. He names some of them outright: shrinking, hiding, hiding behind a stone, or finding no name for some: ‘this’, ‘that’. This solicitation appears futile, though, and so they had been ever since, it is just that the Jews had not recognised them, or did not want to believe they could never again reverse the destiny. Clearer than the transcript, the sound recording shows that Roman contrasts their ignorance and disbelief against his own knowledge – not the one of today, this would be too obvious, but the knowledge he allegedly had there and then. Thereby, he has increased the distance between them, on the one hand, and himself and the other non-Jewish inmates working at that time in the quarry, on the other.

The memory of this tragic experience is conglomerated of the event and its interpretation. The latter feeds on stereotypical images of Jewish people, through the prism of which my Interviewee sees the real Jews getting killed at the quarry. As is known, stereotypes may be built upon contradictions. The Jews being killed move around quietly, “being Jews all the same”, and simultaneously, in the very same moment, are clutching at straws to avoid death. None of their dying strategies can really be approved by the narrator: quietness is a sign of passiveness and impotence, while ‘squirming’ is nonsensical given the inevitability and obviousness of martyrdom at the ‘parachute jumpers’ wall’.

the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_154.

314 As recollected, for instance, by another prisoner from Warsaw, who worked in the quarry at that same time: “On those stairs, I saw corpses only once. These were, I think, Jews who had been shot dead by the Germans, or clubbed to death. Maybe they weren’t strong enough for those stones, were starving.”; account of Zbigniew Dhubak, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_156.

Having evoked these experiences, Roman rushes to add that Jews were not the only ones to have got killed there. Although he could see the Jews being killed in the quarry, he knows that other inmates, Poles included, were murdered in that place too. He is therefore willing to remind about it, so as to make it clear that the Jews did not hold the monopoly on martyrdom at all.

I have paused at this image in order to unveil, to some extent, the complex labour of (his) autobiographical memory, which features Jews many a time, but rarely, so to speak, in a neutral manner.

Let us still stay for a while among the images from the beginning of Roman's stay in the camp – the quarantine at Mauthausen. These recollections occupy a central place in his camp experience, being the basis for his understanding of (the) camp, and his philosophy of survival. This is one of the reasons why they form the framework of the entire camp route: they have been reinforced by the repeated quarantine done at the same camp shortly before the liberation.

[RS:] You'd enter there, but couldn't go out. This was the assumption. And, no holds barred, 'cause you were nothing. You entered the camp and you were nowhere, as simple as that. There was nobody to stand up for you, 'cause there was no like power. And if you only had a bit of luck... // Well, superior to us were those who spoke the German language. He who could speak German could clamber up the *Stubendienst*, the, some sort of, *Arbeit-...* I mean, the one... who writes... .. up the *Schreiber*, he could. It was easier for him, in any case, to get into that camp elite. Whereas those who did not have such possibilities, nor the language, and so on, or had no luck, [*unclear*]. Because I, for instance, had a mate who was in another camp but says... // He said to me thus: 'Roman, if not for the fact that it was a concentration camp, I wouldn't have ever sensed that I've survived a camp.' Thus good it was about him. But his posture was one of a German, himself, and his behaviour, and all these qualities of a German. And the Germans sensed [it].

[PF:] Did he speak German too?

[RS:] Yes, and they sensed some kindred spirit in him. And he was well. Was well, right. But there are also such, we were regular *Häftlings* from the camp, from the Warsaw Rising, so there was no option anyhow. Besides, the time [was] too short to... But, all in all, let's stop talking about time. ... So, I, here already... In any case, you're not asking me about it, myself neither, well, because, what's there to talk about? An annihilation camp, end of story.

The image of 'clashing against' the camp, getting threatened with the camp reality and helplessness reappears once again, and once again is it being built as a group experience: the mechanism of a totalitarian institution. For those brought to Mauthausen by the Warsaw transport in autumn 1944, the camp is an overpowering, crushing force in face of which they remain helpless. But this is not true with all of them, as it occurred then on the spot and would be reconfirmed afterwards, in the narrator's talks with camp mates, not necessarily from the same camp. The camp mechanism is a social one, and therefore it is a complex mechanism. Whereas some of the inmates are 'nothing', 'nowhere', having 'no option'

other than the camp agony they are bearing, there are such who are assigned much better, more 'bearable' roles. Better for them – which also means, more important in terms of holding up the entire camp mechanism. The condition for receiving them is the holding of resources valued high there and the skill to activate them in those specific circumstances. Roman has none such capital whatsoever. There is no one to 'stand up for' him. He is part of the low rank in the camp hierarchy – an ordinary *Häftling*, "regular ... from the camp, from the Warsaw Rising". He watches from this low position those inmates who from the very beginning took these better, higher positions, which remain very distant for him. Seen from this perspective, even a *Stube* (barrack-room) assistant – the *Stubendienst*, or the *Blockschreiber* – block scribe, form part of the camp's elite, and 'are well'. They are distant, out-of-the-ordinary: they can speak German; their postures are German-like; are of 'qualities'; their souls are kindred, which the Germans can 'sense'. Or, they are lucky persons.

All this is beyond my Interviewee's reach at that moment. The moment the camp's first shock wave goes down, he makes temporary attempts at improving his situation – be it by arranging for an extra bowl of soup. Yet he cannot be lucky again:

Just an example, exactly, what situations were occurring. You could get a spanking any time. Any time, you could be destroyed, and, paaah! – you're not there. I once had such incident myself. I joined a queue with the cauldrons to get some soup. For it was so that the *Häftlings*, after all; had to carry soup for themselves, to distribute it among everybody, right? Well, then, who reported, he'd go. And there, at the kitchen, he could ask, I assume, some Pole to give him something, and just eat it. Once he's eaten there, he'd bring along, and get his second portion here. And I, well, wanted to do the same, use the opportunity. And from that block sixteen, as we arrived from Auschwitz to Mauthausen, and were on the quarantine at block sixteen, I can see the others [are doing it] and then I reported too. Well then. I reported there myself, with a Pole, too, and engineer. A canny lad he, he got that tin bowl thrown into the cauldron. Well, just listen, he threw it to the cauldron, I don't know about it, if I knew it or not; in any case, the situation is that the block-leader, that Hitlerite, I mean, not in a uniform but the *Blockältester*, was doing the checking. And, he's coming up to the cauldron. Blast, he spotted it and, '*Verfluchten*, who of you did that?' There's no one to own up. I'm saying, '*Nein*', that one says 'no' too. And he threw it, a bandit. And thus he knew what he could expect, right? There are no clever ones there, everyone's caring about rescuing himself. Me – myself, 'cause that's what it was, but he was rescuing himself also. And, well? And he [= the *Blockältester*] was with, such a, metal poker. And, go slap him!... // Here, like... // Three times, I think. Or more perhaps. I any case, something, behind me, // there's a boy saying, 'Run away, or he'll kill you.' And, well, I clang on to, somehow, jumped out from under that cauldron, 'cause there was that *Blockältester* who was beating, the engineer, the cauldron in the middle, and me. And those in the quarantine, this was a compressed lump, sp one stood beside the other. Thus they were walking along, but it was slow-slow, not like you'd go out

freely. That's like in a ghetto. As you watch those images from the Warsaw Ghetto, this swarm of the Jews, like, that they walk one beside the other like lice. That same thing was there, on that quarantine. The lump was so compacted, that, *wadded jacket* [a colloquial saying used by R.S. as a light swearword]. In any case, well, I managed to break out.

This is one of the most emphatic and concrete close-ups in the whole account. Narrative threads are dominant over commentaries and generalisations, although the scene as a whole is constructed as an example of a typical situation. It was supposed to be a transgression of the ordinary inmate's experience. It finally only reconfirmed his miserable situation, making him aware, in a painful way, of the tight limits of possible action. He had a narrow escape and thus possibly avoided a death, but got a heavy lashing all the same, and yet another brutal lesson of the in-camp rules. He received it not only from the block-leader who gave him a beating with a whip or poker, but also from another, apparently 'regular' inmate whose status is equal to his own. This other lesson was certainly more astonishing and, possibly, more important. When their common action – reporting for carrying the soup in order to win an extra portion – comes to a failure, each of them remains on his own and fights for his life on his own account: "There are no clever ones there, everyone's caring about rescuing himself. Me – myself, 'cause that's what it was, but he was rescuing himself also". This struggle is perceived as completely authorised. These are the rules of the camp game, as it occurs – and the game involves the inmates too. This essential lesson is taken at an important moment, at the very beginning of Roman's stay in the camp. It has embedded him even stronger in his role of ordinary *Häftling*, for whom the camp experience is an incessant struggle for survival.

This dense reminiscence also mentions Jews, though there might have actually been none where the events reported on took place. Jews are evoked just to make more vivid the image of the crowd of prisoners on quarantine, the group into which the narrator attempts to get through as he escapes the block-leader's lashes. My Interviewee does not bother himself to describe the crowd; he finds it much easier to compare it with the image he had solidified in his head.

This imagined crowd of Warsaw Jews is actually built of various images. There are images from the ghetto Roman accidentally watched when, as a teenage boy, he travelled by tramway to Koło district to see his elder brother. The tram line he used was set through the enclosed Jewish quarter area:

I can remember, I was in Leszno St. I was not in the ghetto itself but could see those Jews in front of the entrance gate, on my way to Koło from Marymont. I so travelled, then I was on my way: Leszno St., to Młynarska St., and along Młynarska, to Obozowa St. That is, I was going through the ghetto. ... And it's just that I saw that entrance gate, and Jewesses were there, and Jews, with those armbands. I could see the Jews on their way to work, and how they were beaten. Jews were beaten by Jews. Well, I saw it.

The images seen through the windows of a tram going along the street of the ghetto, and so remembered, seemed to the Interviewee the most similar to those he saw at a very close distance when later at the camp, and of which he was part. But the position of a viewer – a passenger in a tram – is completely different from the one of actor/observer, a prisoner. The passenger was mostly shocked by seeing Jews being ‘beaten by Jews’. He utters this sentence with quite an emphasis, as if it confirmed some important but never directly formulated argument – one that is not only confirmed by the experiences of those travels by tram through the Warsaw Ghetto. It is derived from other data as well; moreover, Roman is supported to this end by his wife who joins our talk at this very moment, believing that she has a very important thing to add: “You know what, this was different, when I now have read *The Pianist*, by Władysław Szpilman, then, what’s it that was going on there. That Jewish police were worse for the Jews than the German police”. As it thus appears, *The Pianist*, or rather, its selective interpretation, may excellently serve the reinforcement of stereotypes, giving evidence to the solidified conviction whereby the Jews are partly to blame for their lot.

The Jewish thread triggers emotion in my Interviewee (and his wife). At this point of his report, the emotion prevents him from observing that not only some Jews beat the other Jews but also some inmates beat the other inmates. Roman has just mentioned his getting beaten by a block-leader, i.e. one of the functional prisoners. The similarities of the Mauthausen *Häftlings* and Warsaw-Ghetto Jews being driven to labour are thus more than external. More important than this or that group resembling a swarm or lice (comparing Jews to lice is a direct reference to the Nazi propaganda language) is perhaps the fact that human interactions are getting organised along the same patterns in both situations; there are some Jews, Poles, inmates who, anointed by SS-men, lash the other Jews, Poles, inmates. It is upon this mechanism that a social operation of the totalitarian institution is founded. While Roman is capable of perfectly recognising this mechanism at a number of moments, now he is deceived by a stereotype or prejudices.

It is rather easy to find convicting evidence against someone who is not liked. For Poles, Jews often tend to be the disliked ‘other’. This is regretfully true also with some former Polish *kacet* inmates, among whom there are eyewitnesses to the annihilation of Jewish people.

The intervention of Roman’s wife has not ended at reinforcing the stereotypes she and her husband shared and sustained together. My presence there has already caused impatience but makes the woman very curious too. It is a completely new situation for her. She is now watching her husband in a before-unknown role of autobiography teller. The meeting has been lasting long and her husband is continuously telling a story, a thing he has never done like this. She can see (or hear) the story he is telling is of importance and she would like it to reach the others. The audience she would have in mind is not some abstract ‘others’ like the researchers using oral history archives but the very specific individuals, of importance to her: her own grandchildren. Their grandfather could give them an unusual lesson (although he is not quite sure about it himself). Once she learns that she will later

receive a copy of this recording, my presence grows even more accepted; her earlier impatience has instantly disappeared. A short exchange between Roman and his wife and me is but a small fragment of this interaction. It is worth quoting to more efficiently report on the ambience of this specific situation, which forms part of the interview anyway. All the more than the like situations have appeared during many other meetings too:

[RS's wife:] Are you tormenting the gentleman still so?

[RS:] Nearly finished.

[Wife:] Pity the grandkids are not around here, they could've heard a little.

[RS:] Ah, you're kidding.

[PF:] I can send you [a copy of] the recording over later on...

[Wife:] That'd be a good idea indeed.

Let us meanwhile be back, together with my Interviewee, with the narrative images concerning his term at the camp. Entering that space also meant meeting senior inmates. For many prisoners of the Warsaw transport that was a turning point in their camp careers – unlike Roman who did not meet his biographical carer at first. He was not chosen by anybody, and thus this thread did not appear point-blank in the first part of our meeting. Inspired by my question, he evokes it now, talking at some length about yet another dimension of his experience of that very moment:

[PF:] I would still be interested what the senior inmates' response was. For in Mauthausen, there were Poles, weren't they, who had been serving their terms for three, or four, years. How did they react to those younger prisoners who were brought along in [the aftermath of] the Uprising? Helping them? Could they be any helpful at all?

[RS:] That's what they couldn't very much do, helping. But, visible was a positive, like... // Compassion, sort of, positive compassion. That they're so young and all the same go get slaughtered. I mean, [there was] compassion of this kind. That they didn't manage to survive. They're going... // Meaning, their position has as if been strengthened a little, that it's not only us to perish but there are those coming over who in some sort of the way, you wouldn't know how, incomprehensibly for them, have found themselves in that 'convictory'. But it was like, you cannot say they got glad at seeing us; rather, it depressed us.

Thus, he has extended his own helplessness and his own hopeless position to the senior prisoners. Roman tries to recognise their thoughts and feelings, look at himself in the mirror of their eyes. It is upon this recognition that he builds his conviction that those ones are helpless as well, and there is nothing they can do for him. The only thing they can muster up is 'positive' compassion and pensiveness over the lot of the young Varsovians who have joined their 'convictory'. They should not be blamed for the passive attitude: what can they do (and what for), at all, if they are going to 'get slaughtered' as well?

This image is a good example of how the experienced of the world by an individual may inform the interpretation of the world as experienced by the others;

and, how one's own experience gets extended to the other people's experience. As we already know, this is not the only image of welcome by the senior *Häftlings* that the numerous camp mates have preserved in their memory. This is true for those who had succeeded a little³¹⁵ as well as for those who, like Roman, did not come across a carer or protector in the camp – or perhaps, no carer looked to finding them.³¹⁶

My Interviewee's experiences from his first weeks in the camp have lasted in his memory in numerous reminiscences. They become animated only in the second or third hour of the interview, in answers given to the questions and also on the occasions of these questions and digressions alongside the replies. Although chaotically evoked, when juxtaposed one beside the other, they compose a coherent image of those first experiences – a picture of affright, helplessness, and eye-witnessing the cruelties. The latter aspect was paralysing in a special way.

And I saw some S[S]-man suffocating one *Häftling* in that *Appellplatz* at Mauthausen. There's the main gate, here's the *Waschraum*, the *mikvah*. And, there was one of the free blocks going, that was a privileged lad, that was not a regular one, like us, ordinary *Häftlings* that came over from the Rising. That was the lad who certainly had been serving his term for a few years and he enjoyed a good reputation, had a profession, and so on. A tailor, perhaps, or maybe a shoemaker, or something, maybe. He served the S[S]-men and the Germans respected him. But it was precisely that one that the S[S]-man had in his sights, which I could see with my own eyes. And how do I know it? Because we were on our way back with those cauldrons, I think, from there, from those ... [unclear]. And, we're watching what's going on. The S[S]-man

315 “In the evening, after work, a few senior prisoners came to us, among them Edmund Ramotowski, called *Wujaszek* (‘The Uncle’). ‘Where are you from, boy?’ I replied him. ‘Then, come over to block no. 2.’ ‘Whom am I supposed to address?’ ‘The Uncle’. I went there almost every day. The Uncle gave us emptied soup cauldrons, so we could lick them clean. There were a lot of lads turning up at his place. He cared about us like a father.”; account of Henryk Strzałkowski, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_111 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner); cf. also the quote from Lech Milewski's account in footnote 285, pp. 381-2.

316 “In Gusen, once the news was dispersed that they had brought along the young from the Rising, the senior inmates got a little interested in us. There were some old ones coming up to our block, squeezed in a piece of bread to one, a piece to the other. I got a quarter of a [loaf of] bread too; but I was such a wimp in that camp; I thought to myself, ‘I'd bite a bite off and will keep the rest for myself till tomorrow. I wake up in the morning, and the bread is gone! Someone took it away from under my head. This piece of bread, that was the only time some alien person helped me when in the camp. Some of the mates were lucky enough to have elder prisoners had them under their protection, but I was chosen by no one.’”; account of Wojciech Topolewski, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_021 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner).

was strangling the *Häftling*, that one from the free barracks. He was strangling him in the way that he held him, held him, till that one fell down. And says that one, 'Aufstehen!'. And we're walking, like that, and looking, right? Everyone's looking in a way so that the S[S]-man wouldn't see him, shit, for if he called him... And the guy's stood up again, reports himself, such was the law, you had to put your cap off before the S[S]-man. And that one's strangling him again. And so he does again and again. He must've, I think, strangled him up, 'cause it is impossible he would've given him free rein somehow.

This reminiscence 'fits' the earlier image of senior inmates – older and with longer camp seniority. No surprise it has so well settled in the narrator's memory. It also confirms the generalised observation that those ones also 'go to their death' and so are of no use. If a prominent inmate, service provider to the SS-men, is perishing in a blink before the eyes of young inexperienced men, they may expect literally anything. It could be, after all, that the execution he now describes was an element of the camp's socio-technology – a spectacle meant, in the first place, to be awesome and paralysing. If this was the case, the goal was fully achieved.

The evocation of that spectacle refreshes – in a manner that astonishes the narrator himself – another scene, which took place a few months later in the Wien-Mödling subcamp. Rather than being a viewer, Roman becomes one of the main actors:

And why am I saying this? The association has just come to my mind. My own case. There's the following situation: from Schwechat I came to Mödling by a lorry. And we went into the camp, that barrack camp, onto that *Appellplatz* and so on, and there they told me to go to the manor [*rewir*], the admission room. And there was I for some time; at last, I was referred to that *Arbeitslager*, the subcamp *Kommando*. And there is... It's the early hours. I'm going out of that manor on my own, it's pretty empty around, 'cause everybody is at work, there's no one in the camp, at the yard. But there's the *Rapportführer* coming, with a dog. From where the entrance gate is, to the manor. And I'm going out of that manor, and there's only: me and the *Rapportführer*, that is, the highest-ranking guy in office there. The *Führer*, the *Rapportführer* with that dog. And, sir, what's going on? It's all with me there, I have to pee, have to relieve myself, have to do everything. I'm not even sure if I didn't pee into the pants. But there's that one, the *Rapportführer*, how should I behave? Me, as only I spotted him, then I took off my cap, and thus: one, two, three, and I'm looking at him. Whatever strength had I in me, maybe there was not so much of a strength, but I did strike it. And so I'm looking at him. Well, it must've been all right, it seems, 'cause, goddamn [*orig.*, '*oh jacket'*], he only could release the dog. I could see him strangle the Jew. Well, for the Jew was also being strangled by an S[S]-man in the quarry, down there. Then, he wouldn't be willing to do the strangling ever more, then he released the dog. The dog started, you know... Oh good gracious me. And I just compared myself against that, goddamn bloody thing [*orig.*, '*oh wadded jacket'*]. And that hound, was, such a, Alsatian or, whatever, German sheepdog. Alsatians, great ones. For, once he released it toward him... And, fortunately, gave it no command. He gave it no command, and

I marched past. And I was still walking like that, all the time, till he perished from my sight. I didn't look back at all then. For I'm saying, fuck'd thing, he'd call me, and, the 'cups' again.

What is it that causes the tangle of the reminiscence of an old prisoner tormented to death, which is eye-witnessed by a crowd of young men, and this last described situation? The reason is, probably, that both have resided in his memory as direct, face-to-face contact with an SS-man. For Roman, as well as for a plenty of inmates sharing the situation with him, similarly positioned in the camp's hierarchy of authority and subjection, the SS-man is a scaring, distant, and dismal figure. Not a figure even – this would have been too complex; an individual, rather, reduced to inflicting death, pain, cruelty, one that focuses all the most ferocious traits. The prospect of approaching this individual, or even going past each other along the camp alley, triggered enormous dismay, activated the blackest of demons and the most horrid images, an abundance of which had been produced by the earlier camp experience. Roman's experience was no different in this respect: he was, after all, a spectator of meetings of this kind. All of a sudden, one more image from the quarry was activated: it was there that he had seen a big killer dog which bit a Jew to death.

Still today, so many years after that meeting, its reminiscence triggers strong emotion – as immediately graspable in the rhythm and pace of the story being told, in the strength and intonation of the voice: as if something of that enormous tension reappeared. Such one-to-one meeting is part of experience of so few surviving prisoners. If appearing, they are usually constructed in a pretty similar way.³¹⁷ These images are so different from those evoked by the few privileged inmates

317 One former inmate called this a 'movie scene'; let us quote an extensive fragment of his account: "Because I once walked along that gravel path in Gusen II. This is, that was already in the later months. There was an SS-man coming on the opposite side, the commander of the block, and nothing, // there's nothing, // I don't know, this was going on so strange, it was just like a movie scene. 'Cause I'm walking on one side, I walked rather quickly, and the SS-man on the other side, and there are no other prisoners. And we two pass by each other, of course when you walked past, at all, when an SS-man went by, you were supposed to stand at attention, 'Mütze ab! – put off, right?, for it was a 'god' walking by. So, I brought all that about, that's as it should have been, that I plucked off the cap from my head, and he, he did not see me there. But, whooz! He threw, he took two or three drags of a cigarette, a beautiful, large one, and he threw the cigarette at my feet. And, and I went on, didn't take the cigarette and I walked on, the cap's back on my block [= head] and I walked on, and I hear, 'Halt!'. So, I look back, and he, to me, // instead of shooting me dead, he showed me why didn't I, that cigarette ... I'm to walk back and take the cigarette. And so I walked back, and took it. What does that look like psychologically? If I were such a bandit SS-man and threw a cigarette of the sort at such a prisoner's feet, and that prisoner's not flinging and not taking the cigarette, then [I] would shoot the bloody bastard dead, for that's a disparagement, because he made a gesture, tremendously, didn't he. ... Where, where did I disregard such a god. That's a rather interesting matter, because... .. Well, he went on, I went on,

who entered into real social face-to-face interactions with exponents of the camp authority! – even if such interactions were rudimentary and instantaneous.³¹⁸

Much more frequent than such individual experiences have been the collective ones, especially for ordinary prisoners such as this Interviewee, engulfed, carried away and floated by the rapid and destructive camp current; those who did not have enough luck, strength and skill to withstand it or gain at least a minimal influence on the direction and speed with which they are drifting downstream. Until the end of his inmate term, Roman Strój would not even gain a control of this kind. Here goes another scene from the Wien-Mödling camp – which means, from one of the last months of his *kacet* period:

And what the Germans did to brighten the time for them. The SS-men. With the hands of our *kapos*, *Häftlings*. The *kapos* were just like we were, only that there was [= they were] jacks-in-office doled out the German wages. The Germans appointed him: ‘Hans, you will be the one, Ivan, you will be the one, and you will do the battering.’ Those SS-men [once] had a few, somehow, and made themselves a circus. So, as they made a ‘fitness trail’... That means, there’s the barrack, there’s the door, and there, where there’s empty space, the *kapos* are standing on the one and on the other side, with the, like, various things. The rubbers [i.e. whips], or flails, of a sort, or what. And now, everyone’s running through, the whole personnel they had appointed there had to run through those *kapos*. That was, exactly, on that *Arbeitskommando* in Mödling. And, we’re running. And they’re battering. Lashing all the time. Those are running, and I also am in that mob, and am running. And am saying, goddamn [‘oh

but, but if this is conceivable just like this, at this moment, then it’s a sort of, like, a movie scene, isn’t it?”; account of Janusz Bąkowski, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_154.

- 318 Here is an example of human interaction between an inmate and an SS-man: “And that one calls me, no, that SS-man, tells me to come over: ‘Ah, you’re a Pole’. I say, I don’t know. And says he, ‘Well then, come with me then’. You know, he took me and ushered, as he had a desk in that building-site, to that desk, and there, such an, iron stove: ‘You sit here, and so it doesn’t go out there in the stove’. I’m thinking to myself, what’s the point, why’s it he’s taken me like that there. And, it goes on heating, I’m stoking, it was winter, glad, on the one hand, was I, and curious, on the other hand, what would ensue from it there. You know, sir, and, he, // that was until noon, he’s going to his lunch, and says to me thus: ‘I’m going to my lunch’, and he was an Austrian; ‘and you go get yourself, there’s bread, sausage, some eggs, you’ll make yourself a meal, ‘cause I can’t bring things for you’. You think I took it? Didn’t take a thing, because I had fear. Didn’t take a thing. He’s back, saying, ‘So, did you have your meal?’ I’m saying, ‘A little’. He looked awhile, says, ‘You haven’t even tried a thing there’, he says. ‘Get it and make it, and you’ve supposed to eat it’. I ate it”. This Interlocutor goes on recounting how he sew slippers for that SS-man and his family, and how he was rewarded for that: with food, alcohol, money; cf. account of Stanisław Wochal, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_062.

jacket'], how to avoid these blows there. And somehow did I succeed, that I made a lower motion than the neighbour on my left. That is, he was my shield, for I hid lower. And I don't know if he spanked him or not. In any case, I somehow leaped out unharmed, and there on, you'd relax. ... Eh you, goddamn bloody thing [orig., '*waddled jacket*'], that's what it was like. [*laughs*] Democracy was there. That, once they battered, they did batter, there's no wizardry.

This is yet another scene where prisoners are beating other prisoners – inspired by their overseers and to the delight of SS-men who are ranked higher up in the camp's prestige hierarchy (not axiologically but in terms of interaction³¹⁹). Roman Strój perceives the battering *kapos* as incidental perpetrators of the social roles they have been allocated. He is one among those being lashed, and thus his perspective is bottom-up, as usual. He is part of the crowd, mass of anonymous mutes in that 'circus': part of the 'mob' that is 'running'. The only thing he can afford when so 'running' through the whips is to crouch a little more than the one who is running right alongside him, so that other man could take on more blows, being a 'shield' for him for a moment. This only possible way to reduce the pain was obviously applied by others as well, which remarkably diminished the method's efficiency; but before anything happened, he managed to happily end the run, 'leap out unharmed'. Today, a vivid image still resides in the memory; a large distance toward the occurrence enables the narrator to integrate it into his autobiography. The belief has also remained about the specific camp equality, which he now calls 'democracy'. This equality or democracy could mean a community of fate, but this is a euphemism: there was no community in that situation. Rather than that, levelling-down the pariahs of a totalitarian institution was the case – so ingenious that each of those 'running in the mob', avoiding blows on his back, increased the number of blows appearing on the backs of the others, and did not even have time to be concerned about making of them a human shield for himself.

The thread of camp hospital appeared in the first section of Roman's account. He went there owing to phlegmon, a typical prisoner illness. The 'manor' turned out to be a rescue site for him³²⁰: having wheedled it from a Polish doctor to leave

319 This scene, and many alike ones, is readily associable with Philip Zimbardo's well-known 1971 Stanford experiment.

320 This is reconfirmed by a number of former inmates' reports, perceiving the *rewir* as the place of rescue and respite. Here goes an example: "And I reported there, to a doctor at the 'district', and I was all lucky I was received, recognised, for some were not recognised. And if they would not receive there, he'd go to work, fall, then the S[S]-men finished him off, and they'd already bri-... // they already brought corpses to the roll-call, and they'd bring those corpses like this every day, and I was lucky in the way that I was received. And... and I got to the 'district' and relaxed somewhat there. That was about nothing else than just not going to the labour."; account of Józef Bednarczyk, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_107.

him there, he eventually avoided transportation to a Mauthausen gas chamber (“And he helped me. Because, if not for him, then... .. I would’ve gone already then.”). However, this same ‘manor’ was, for many, a place of their tragic death.³²¹ This closeness of death – just for the asking – when you were dying and when the others were dying, or had already died on the hospital pallet, was also an experience characteristic to ordinary *Häftlings* such as my Interviewee.

[RS:] They were giving some medicines, but were doing it no more for you to get healed but they were making their experiments on the humans. And there was a doctor, like, on the ‘manor’, a German, Hitlerite, who ordered to get exercise, looked at the heart rate, looked at this, looked at that.

[PF:] And, to you also, did they... ?

[RS:] I got it too. I also got [it], I got the split-jumps when he came in, and then that pulse, he looked what the heart rate was, and so on. But some people could not stand these procedures. So, that was nothing of a treatment to get healed, but just a treatment for you to peg out. Just in this way. And theoretically, all was OK. For example, my colleague, a lad also from the Warsaw Uprising, a mate. // You can say he was a colleague, for we made friends within a couple of days. ‘Cause I was showing him around, this, that, for his legs were swelling And he kept on saying he had to survive, for he had a girlfriend and so forth, he got engaged to her in the Warsaw Uprising... .. Well, then, they gave him a bodkin, the ordinary way, the... the...

[PF:] The fix.

[RS:] The fix. And today [i.e. one day] I talked with him normally, and tomorrow [= the following day], he was dead. And the reason is? For, if they were willing to cure him, they would cure him, rather than giving him a bodkin. And the bodkin was given for him to be finished off. For he had his legs swelling. Well, then, they didn’t want to do the operation things, there was no way at all to do any operations there. Not at all. That was, like, smoke-and-mirrors, load of crap. The little manor thing...

For instance, there died, at my place... // I had my bed on the right-hand side, and a German had his to the left. He was still alive yesterday. In the morning, I am looking, some sort of, // I’m calling him, like, or shaking, you were supposed to get up, let’s say, ‘*Aufstehen!*’, wash yourself, and so on. I had to move him. But he, he’s not getting up. Well, and? And he died in the night, during the night did he die. But

321 Let us evoke one more picture of the ‘manor’ as a place that made death unavoidable: “I was fearing, there, bewared I, didn’t want I, I knew they will kill off there, ‘cause the Germans suspected only sly-old-foxes are goin’ there... .. But I, I knew there’s a ‘finisher’ there, for, like this, see?, all were saying that if only to the manor, there’s a finisher.”; account of Antoni Żak, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_107.

The ambivalent function of the camp hospital has been covered by a.o. A. Pawełczyńska, op. cit., pp. 92–94.

the interesting thing was, how to approach it, that's what I don't know. His hands folded like this, and underneath the hands, a piece of bread. That'd make you mad, awesome thing. ... Now, as you reminisce the moment... // Because then, it was regular. He lay, had his bread hidden, for he feared it might be stolen by someone. But now, if you look at this, that's a horrible thing. Well, and a decent German, actually, was gone.

As it turns out, there, in the manor, where he was not driven, beaten, chased away from one place to the other all the time, Roman already started building a closer relationship with another inmate, breaking his isolation, and through such a bond, psychologically detaching himself from the surrounding and crushing camp hell. It even began seeming that he had almost managed to quit his loneliness, that they had managed to enter into ordinary interpersonal relations with another Varsovian he had met there – ‘make friends’, as ‘you can say’ – but this relationship gets immediately brutally broken by one of the usual camp methods of inflicting death: intracardiac phenol injection.

There is not a while of respite, to allow for considering the death of the would-be camp-mate friend, because there is another man dying at once beside him – a ‘decent German’, for a change. That one is privileged to pass away unaided, so to put it. Roman's memory resuscitates its strongly rooted image of a dead prisoner lying on the plank-bed. ‘Regular’, in the camp conditions, watched incogitantly at that time, now, in a narrative retrospection, now takes in a deep significance the narrator cannot even recognise. The image all of a sudden becomes ‘awesome’, ‘mad’, triggers fear; not really the whole image but its fragments. The intercourse with a dead man: waking him up, poking, calling his name – is being reported fluently, incident-wise. This is all ordinary. The only thing out-of-the-ordinary is his folded hands and a piece of bread under them. Did he pray? Did he want to die with a piece of his bread in his hands? Did not manage to eat it up? The piece of bread was not stolen from him, although he did not need it any more – not as a thing to eat, at least? Or, perhaps, the Interviewee was so emaciated with hunger that he could not resist this portion of bread donated to him?³²²

322 The hunger for bread no more needed by a dead person reappears in many an account. For some of the Interlocutors, the way they behave in such a situation is a touchstone of moral devastation the camp had caused in them: “I was lying in a small trough with a dying chap; a Pole was he. I was only interested if he's going to die after he's issued his bread or before he's issued his bread. I was lucky, because he died two hours after our having been issued the afternoon-evening bread. Once he died, then two portions were left over for me, right? Because he first was issued..., and since he died in, y'know... then, there was – nothing doing!, then I still had two portions of bread then. And he was later taken out to the crematorium, regular thing, y'know... [*lighting a cigarette*]”; account of Stefan Pręgowski, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_003.

These questions, or maybe just some of them, are the tracks which would probably help us rationalise the impression of uncanniness this experience exerted on the narrator; yet, Mr Strój does not suggest us to follow this path. The image's autobiographical meaning is not about a punctilious explanation of the meanings but, precisely, in its eeriness, imperviousness, and metaphysical quality.

The piece of bread kept in the folded hands of the dead man redirected our conversation to bread as a subject matter; this triggered yet another reminiscence. Following the many previous images, it is not much surprising that the reminiscence concerns a loss of one's own portion of bread, rather than 'arranging for' (more literally, 'organising', as the inmate jargon had it) an extra portion.

The Russkis were particularly, in this, // to be fair, they were stealing like cobblers. Myself, in that Mödling, as I went to Mödling, then I had to report there at the block, and then I had that little trouble with that *Rapportführer*, with that dog. Well, and what now? That Ukrainian smashed me so badly, 'cause he was a *kapo* – the Ukrainian, he smashed me on the mug, and for nothing. For I only came to see him to report myself. I went over there by order, that I am referred from Schwechat, and to get reported there with you, with you sir, I don't know what, whatever... And so he was smashing me, I don't know how much. But this is unimportant. What's important is that there resided, slept beside me on the plank-beds, two Russians, *komsomolets*. One of them Ivan, the other, say, Grisha, whatever. There was nothing you could maintain; they'd pinch everything at once, in one night. For you would fall asleep, in any case. Whatever the case, that was a moment that you had to doze. Then, at that moment you dozed, and you held everything in your mitt, whatever was there, be it a piece of bread, or whatever it would be, right? Then, you held it in your mitt. That, and that, they took off. ... Or, not only that. There were such who smoked cigarettes. Then, he'd take that ridge [i.e. slice of bread] and give it for cigarettes. Then, he'd give him three braves, or not braves, or some sort of another... And that for the cigarettes. But, those Russians; they were such, oh... ?? They were artists. Well, artists – pickpockets, simply put. Although the Russian from Stalingrad recounted, I don't know: 'Ah', says he, 'they were all stealing things, unbelievable. The rich, everybody, lifting was done all around.'

For others, it is a gauge of staying unaffected by such devastation: "Wiktor Sadowski, a friend of mine, got the bloody flux. When I was leaving for work, he remained, laying in a coop in the barrack. I went up to him, embraced him: 'Well, Wiktor, I'm off to work'. – 'You're not going to see me anymore; the crematorium...'. He couldn't eat any more, and his portion of bread lay beside him. When I was looking at that bread, my hands were trembling, to eat it. For I was hungry; we ate grass, after all... But I didn't touch that. And I'm saying to myself today that I passed that exam. That was, wasn't it, my friend. When back, I did not see Wiktor in there anymore. There was no bread either, obviously"; account of Kazimierz Pieńkos, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_020 (recorded by Tomasz Gleb).

This is yet another hard camp lesson that an ordinary, inexperienced and young *Häftling* has been through. Yet, in Roman's reminiscences, the loss of bread is not just a lesson – learned once again – on the ruthlessness of the camp rules, including relationships between ordinary inmates (though less lost than him). This lesson is also about the strength of national divisions within the inmate community. The bread is stolen not by a human from another human, by an inmate from another inmate: it is a *Russki* that steals it from a Pole – although the Pole was, plausibly, merely casual at that place.

Ivan and Grisha are not some specific prisoners, some multidimensional figures: in this reminiscence, they appear as human types – those of *Russki* thefts. They have their names, but we are not sure whether these are their real names or merely ascribed to them as typically Russian names. This is of no great importance, or is even neutral, to the Interviewee. Not the specific situation of his being robbed of a piece of bread is made the narrative's focus: it is, instead, a generalising remark on Russians, those 'stealing like cobblers'. There is not even a ghost of indignation at such behaviour resounding in Roman's voice as he tells this story. It is hard to incriminate or even harbour a grievance against those specific thieves, once they merely represent their Russian culture. This is clearly expounded by a Russian from Stalingrad, after all. And this is why they command respect in the narrator, for they have developed mastery in their trade as thieves, capable of pinching everything at once, in one night'. He therefore calls them 'artists' – with a smile and without being cynical.

This fragment of the story features no powerful symbolisation, as opposed to the earlier image of the German who died in the 'manor'. There is no idealising reflexion on downtrodden moral norms because of the camp, bestiality, or ruthless struggle for survival. Roman Strój does not tend to resort to the like humanistic interpretations. He simply reports on his ordinary camp experiences³²³,

323 The theft of bread, evoked here as an ordinary occurrence, appears as an extremely unusual, very rare event in recollections of many former inmates. As a rule, it is associated with an emphasis put on the sanction such an act was threatened with – that is, the penalty of death: "Well, I can remember we were very hungry and I remember, // I should like to say one such interlude, which could have cost me, well, my life, straight away. That I, on entering the latrine, that restroom, of a sort, noticed, in that *kapo*-booth [*kapówka*], there was sleeping, you know, that warder [*sztubowy*] man, // the block-leader, // a piece of bread on the... Well, I couldn't walk past quietly. Not even for my brother, who was very hungry. And, well, I could see him sleep. And I went in, and stole that bread. And we ate it under the blanket. But then on, as I could see similar cases, then they instantly murdered, kicked black-and-blue at once, // killed, or drowned in a barrel, you know, and that, end of story. I would've never done it if I'd had more experience of the sort. But that was my first and, probably, last organisation [i.e. arranging for food, e.g. a piece of bread] of the sort, the plunge I took."; account of Stanisław Leszczyński, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_031.

imperceptibly turning them into exemplifications of the more general rules, so that – forming part of the autobiography – they may reinforce the identity, confirm the self-definitions, and fit the stereotypes.

Russian inmates have proved particularly memorable in terms of my Interviewee's camp experiences, but traces left in his memory by 'ethnically other' prisoners are also detectable. Their narrative image is all the more worth our attention. It is constructed as a reply is given to a completely different question – about the possibility of procuring extra food in the camp. Such casual close-up on the others, uninspired by any specific question, appears more spontaneous and thus, let it be assumed, more authentic:

[PF:] And you, did you ever manage to get an extra serving?

[RS:] Once, once, once... // Can't remember exactly, but it seems to me that it was so once that he gave me there some sort of... The thing is, it was like that with it: A Russian is there, that one's Belgian, that one, shit, some Dutchman, that one, again some kind of a *Muselmann*, and communication was a tough thing. But, 'soup', 'soup', // *Essen, Essen* [German, 'food', 'meal' (PF's note)], then they knew what's on...

There were few Belgians, there was a handful of Luxembourgiens, then they [were] down, // the Frenchmen were down too, 'cause, well, they were few. It'd be awkward for a Frenchman to couple with a Pole, since he had a[nother] Frenchman [available]. There were some twenty of those Frenchmen, so they added up [*sic*]. And later, when they received the parcels, the French [got] seven kilos, and the Pole, four kilograms per four. What d'you think! The Yugoslavians had it even better than us. And we were sold a pup. One parcel per four [of us]. And the French, seven kilo. The 'lords', they were walking like, you know... And the Russians, nothing. For they were not members of the Red Cross, and only Comrade Stalin, to them... // But proud they were, damn it, then they too needed being... // They were saying, '*Nechevo, nechevo* [i.e. 'don't bother'], there's Comrade Stalin'. And so they were rescuing themselves, while still at the camp. But they were stealing like stink. They cheated us, those *kapos* and those block-leaders, that, when... // For these parcels, as they were distributing, they were distributing them at the barrack. Well, and, at a distance from the window. For, if you were close to the window, then the *Russkis*, behind the windows on their hunkers, and when a parcel... // And, when some of the *Russkis* tipped the wink that the parcels are already there, then they, through the window, and, whozz!, they forced out the door, // those windows And, well, they fled, and had their meal when still on their way [*laughs*]. Shit..... But the Italians were interesting. I don't know how many parcels they actually received there, kilograms. But [they] were good men. One of those Italians says, 'Roman, come up to me, I'm...', somewhere, 'from Palermo', or something like, 'you go with me', says he, 'the Italians, when they are on the way [back] to their state yet, then, once they take Italians, you call me, and I'll take you by the hand, and you'll go.' That was, sort of, nice of him that he says, 'And I've got everything, a rich man I am, you've got no idea about the way I live.'

Anonymous, inaccessible, speaking some strange languages, whoever they might have been (“that one, shit, some ...”), some of them already beyond any national category: the *Muselmann*-ed ones... Not much can be said of each of them separately. In that ‘Babel Tower’, it is so hard to win but an extra portion of soup single-handedly – although soup, in particular, is named with a word everyone around there understands: a German word, so that it can be picked up unmistakably also when uttered by a functional person. This attentiveness for soup was a survival strategy – especially for those prisoners who had no chance to gain much more than that. There were such, however, who would not have ever eaten the camp soup, scorning it, as they could afford to do so.

Seen from the position of a bereft, young Polish prisoner, the others around appear privileged – be it because they stuck together. Still when working at the factory, those aliens tended to form coherent groups, supporting one another within them. Later on, in the last weeks before the liberation, they receive better or larger parcels. During his second stay at Mauthausen, with thousands of prisoners of various nationalities awaiting the liberation, Roman is no more on his own: there, he is part of a large group of Polish prisoners. Yet he still has a sense of wrong, for ‘even the Yugoslavians’ received more than the Poles did. There are Russians too, receiving nothing, but they are tough, aren’t they; they believe in Stalin and this belief keeps them going – and besides, they are smarty-pants and thieves. There is, therefore, no doubt that it was us, the Poles, that they ‘were sold a pup’. This is how, through defining the differences between the ‘aliens’ and ‘us’, our own national identity strengthens.

The Italian mates are the only ones this Interviewee finds it uneasy to distance himself, and build an image of himself, as a Pole, in an opposition to this group. A happenstance was that one of those Italian prisoners persuaded Roman to go to his country, inviting him to his place. This only interactive episode suffices for recognising that Italians, all of them, at least those in the camp, were ‘interesting’ and ‘good men’. It even becomes irrelevant how much of the stuff they were receiving with Red Cross parcels on the eve of liberation; the parcels that, as memorised by inmates sharing the situation, gain enormous importance:

[PF:] And the prisoners, as they were receiving those parcels, did they swap [them]?

Was there, some sort of, camp [commodity] exchange’, or, every man for himself...?

[RS:] No, never, there’s nothing like an exchange, nothing of that sort. Everyone was holding this, and, just for him to keep it. Where could you hide it? That was supposed to be eaten up, quickly... And, there was nowhere to hid it, well, where’d you hide it then? There was nothing of a repository. ...

There [= in the parcel] was, the following: butter was there, some canned fish – well, those American ones, in Poland we have [them] too now, some pâté, things like that. That was one kilogram altogether.

The distances and borderlines between us and them, those ‘ethnically other’ ones, would have certainly been redesigned, had fate been different, the only righteous one turning up to a Russian, or Frenchman, or Spaniard. In such a case, the content

of parcels given to Italians could have quite gained in importance. Completely different constructions of 'alien' are found in the reminiscences of those former inmates who – having, most of them, spent several years in the camp and attained better-than-the-worst positions in the camp hierarchy – managed to develop in the course of their prisoner careers more ordinary human relations with the ethnically diverse inmates.³²⁴ Roman was not part of the group.

That one was the only parcel he ever received during his camp imprisonment. He would receive no letters. The lack of these two elements of camp experience, otherwise of key importance to many a prisoner, is striking in the accounts of prisoners from Warsaw and all those who ended up in the camp during the last months of its functioning. Apart from the few first months, of spring 1940, those months were the hardest to survive.

A few days' quarantine at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the labour done at the quarries in Mauthausen, transport as part of the *Jungkommando* to Wien-Floridsdorf and right afterwards further up, to Wien-Schwechat, a vocational training there for an armament factory, falling ill and the 'manor', and the labour in the Wien-Mödling adits, the death march in April and one more stay at Mauthausen, the last few weeks before it was liberated: all these are external stages of Roman Strój's camp path, as partly recorded in the documents. Yet, his autobiographical memory does not strictly stick to this order, going astray its own ways, resuming the threads of pre- and post-camp experiences. Sometimes, we manage to relate the images it evokes quite uneasily and after thorough consideration, in a joint effort. There are many absent details there which, as a general rule, tend to appear in narratives of former inmates. Has not the fifteen-year-old's memory recorded them? Have they blanched in the later years, as they were of no importance to him? Have they receded, as they have not been recorded in stories told a multiple times? There is no conclusive answer.

Our conversation now continues along the lines of my attempted arranging, through more detailed inquiring, the scattered, dispersed, narratively non-concluded camp stories. I have attempted to reconstruct their elementary chronology, to ascribe the narrative images to a possibly specific place and definable time. This appears generally feasible, at the expense of much effort. Roman

324 The following fragment is a good exemplification of a completely different experience with 'ethnically other' co-inmates: "We were supported, the Poles were supported by parcels, and as I said, neither the Frenchmen, nor the Russians, nor the Spaniards received these parcels. [This was in an earlier period, before 1945.] We helped in a variety of ways. Friendships were emerging. I, for instance, was close friends with the Spaniards, from whom I learned the language and whom I somehow served with my command – the camp command of German. We made friends with the Frenchmen, at least [this is] what I can say about myself. The closest contacts were between me and the Yugoslavians."; account of Stanisław Dobosiewicz, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_014.

Strój leads me hastily through subsequent stages of his prisoner's way, the one he made through Mauthausen and its subcamps. This shortcut considerably facilitates also a chronological and spatial arrangement of earlier images – the obvious condition being that one is in search of such a fact-based order. For those investigating into the history of (rather than a narrative on) the camp, and who might someday take interest in this story and read it in historical terms, such elementary factual order may probably be of essential importance.

Yet even these hard-fact and detail-related fragments of my Interviewee's account, something quite opposite stands out: namely, how imprecise and ahistorical human memory at times tends to be; what effort it requires to cram chaotic episodes into the frame of a linear narrative. And, how imperfect the effect of such effort can be. My questions often lead the narrator's memory toward the next loose images, which have not much to do with factual precision. Some of these close-ups seem quite familiar, like the picture of Spaniard, or Russians the thieves. Some are not just familiar but identical with the previous ones – like the onomatopoeic 'buzzzzzz', associated by the memory with a specific situation; it is, therefore, replayed every time the narrator constructs its reminiscence. There are some new images too: a Polish *kapo* (again, without generalising that Poles thrashed other Poles); a German inmate, former soldier, squeezed down to the very bottom of the camp hierarchy; etc.

We thus gain insight here into the very mechanism of remembering or recalling things, into the labour of memory – when the Interviewee concludes certain occurrences from certain others, unclear and blurred from somehow more distinct and dependable ones. Also, we can see how access has already been lost to certain images in the memory: attempts at regaining it end up in failure. Then, surrender comes: "hell knows, I don't know"; whilst, in some other place, the narration gets suspended on the phrase: "But, what it was like, what was that...?". Scholars who approach oral history accounts as an extra, complementary historical source, rather than a record of human awareness (in all good faith), will find all such instances of vagueness as diminishing the report's value. As for myself, I find every single image my Interviewee constructs – including those blurred or defective ones – important and significant.

There are more such images in this account, also outside the fragments having been quoted. Some are complementary for the earlier stories; others appear for the first time. It would not be possible to have all of them evoked right now. There is no need, in fact – for, like many of those earlier analysed, these images are, as a general rule, (being) constructed from the same perspective – one of a lost, scared, lonely, frightened young *Häftling* from the Warsaw transport. Thus, they do not considerably contribute to the image of *kaceta's* social universe Roman Strój has built elsewhere, across his narrative.

This trait, shared by a number of accounts, shows how coherent the whole narration is, in both of its parts – including the second, and one with respect to the other. How is it possible, if we are revolving around chaotic images and pictures? Chaos appears with the sequences of the events being recollected, manifesting

itself in incessant breakage of their chronologies, numerous digressions, marginal episodes, avalanching images. There is something important that is common to them: the point of observation from which they are (being) constructed. This is true for the moments Roman Strój evokes concrete situations, pieces of his personal camp experience, as well as when he develops generalisations, makes comments or expresses his opinions. All throughout can we hear a narration of a prisoner who constantly moves within the lower range of the camp, an inmate who dangerously approaches the ungraspable borderline of the condition described as ‘turning into a *Muselmann*’.³²⁵ Not just approaches but actually crosses it – as attested by his now-reactivated reminiscences of his stay at hospitals after the liberation:

There was a bloody load of those sicknesses, of various sorts I don’t really know now. But, yes: in Lohr on the Main, I also was in the hospital, in Schweinfurt I also was in the hospital. So, I was going from one hospital to the other, wherever I just found myself. That means, I was nearing the...

Because they didn’t recognise, everywhere, that I was a man. Meaning, a *Muselmann*, this, that, and so on. That means, I must’ve been so tremendously attenuated that I was breaking up. Well, it was all just about getting to a normal human figure. That was the point in that. And what were the complications there, well, that was the basic thing I talked about. And what were the other... Aha, a *Nierenkrankheit* [German, ‘nephropathy/kidney disease’], just a moment... I had something about the kidneys. *Nierenkrankheit*. It was in Regensburg, exactly there, in that hospital, among others – *Nierenkranke* [‘the nephritic’], and there was some other *-kranke* thing too. So, of those illnesses, there...

[PF:] And you applied there by yourself, from the camp, or was it that you were selected and transported from one place to the other?

No, it was that either I got to know, and reported at, such a, madam doctor, say, as if, to our... And I am from the camp, and this, and that, and that again. And she, based on this and the examination, which was maybe done there, I don’t even know, can’t remember if there was some examination done, or was it just, like, stethoscope thing. This is how it proceeded, that. Whereas, was it a case, there probably was one such case that I was transferred. That I got a referral, from Lohr, for instance, or to Lohr, from Würzburg, or, from Schweinfurt. From Schweinfurt, I think. It’s possible that in Schweinfurt, I had a direction to [i.e. was allocated a compulsory treatment in] Lohr on the Main. To that SS-men’s hospital there, with those kind and nice nuns. And this was one such case. ... There was only a separate hospital on the beautiful river of Main. Lohr on the Main. A beautiful hospital, in a beautiful garden; a wonderful

325 As regards Polish authors’ references to ‘turning into a *Muselmann*’ [‘*zmuzułmanienie*’], the phenomenon is concisely covered by e.g. A. Pawełczyńska, op. cit., pp. 94–97. A penetrating elaboration on the subject-matter, comprising numerous fragments of accounts of saved *Muselmanns*, has been proposed in: Z. Ryn, S. Kłodziński, ‘Na granicy życia i śmierci. Studium obozowego „muzułmaństwa”’, *Przegląd Lekarski*, 1983, no. 1, pp. 27–83.

thing. And from there on, once the game of those hospitals ended, then I already got to Wetzlar, and to Gießen, and so forth...

A camp inmate thus turns into a patient, and from the standpoint of a lost, bewildered patient, he constructs a story on his first experiences while set free. A hospital building, examinations, medical procedures – all this sets the framework of this liberty. None of these are the narrator's actions; on the contrary: again, like when in the camp, these actions are done to him, with respect to him. He is subject to them after being diagnosed as being a 'non-human', a *Muselmann*. In constructing this narrative image, Roman accepts this definition of himself, as imposed by the others, accepting it as the valid self-definition. Today, he knows that it helped him survive: no more in the camp but thereafter.

By now, we have learned quite a lot of Roman Strój's experiences gained in the camp and in the period right before his camp term, of the memory of these experiences, and of the ways in which meaning is added to them and autobiographical narrative constructed based on them. It is not quite much that we have got to know so far about the pre-camp and post-camp paths that led to/from those experiences. My Interviewee was not talking a lot about them, almost neglecting them in the first section of the interview. Pieces of these paths have nonetheless appeared in our conversation. Let us now try and recognise the most important significances the narrator attaches to them in the context of his autobiographic story.

What characterises the images from the childhood years, both those from before the war and those from Warsaw under Occupation, is the reoccurring motif of poverty. This is the main solder of those experiences, and it is through it that the relationships in Roman's family, the situation of his parents, brother, sisters, are perceived. Poverty penetrates the narrator's entire social world; it is the starting point for this biography (and autobiography). Moreover, poverty is an important dimension of his identity: it was the pressure of poverty that drove his farmer parents to settle to Warsaw, and so Roman turned into a Varsovian, though born somewhere else. Roman's place of residence was not the only thing brought about by poverty. Poverty and the process of tackling and overcoming it has contributed to the universe of his social experiences, the space of possible and available interactions, his social position, etc. No surprise, Roman revisits his poverty experience in his narrative several times:

[RS:] And, in Warsaw, [my father] was an employee, sort of, well, don't know... // casual labour; how to name it, then? Jobless at all, and he had no profession. For he was a farmer. Then, you can only say, a farmer. A farmer who did casual labours in a town. Well, that's how you can say it. ... Also, my mother had no profession, and so, together... Very hard. Very. And there was five of us, the brothers-and-sisters. ... three sisters and the brother and me. That makes, five. The thing is, my brother was, fortunately, one of the eldest. Because the sister was the eldest, then was the brother, the second sister, the third sister, and me. And the situation was, like, that

thanks to the fact that my brother had already taken a job, once they arrived in Warsaw, // because we were dispersed all over the country. To [i.e. some settled with] the family, one of us here, another there, another one there... that's what it was like. And there were incredible scenes happening, better stay away of that. But later, that company all came together to Warsaw, the parents and that one, and the kids, and that... // And well, my brother was already employed, had a full-time job, that already was one-hundred and five zloty, plus a dwelling. He got a tied accommodation. ... He was an employee, the regular way, in Koło, precisely, in that workers' housing estate. He got a job as a stoker. And a company apartment. So we instantly had there, as I say, from hell to heaven. [*laughs*]

[PF:] And, was it that the whole family moved in there?

[RS:] Well, the whole family in that one flat, in that one room.

[PF:] Which is, the first brothers-and-sisters and the parents?

[RS:] Because that was a room plus a kitchen. And a bathroom. A bathroom, that means, just the WC. But that already was a WC, that was even a gas cooker. And, the 'Stefan Żeromski' workers' housing estate, for the workmen. The lucky thing was, that room was big. It had, that room, just to be frank, twenty-something, four or six, [square] metres. So, you could locate yourself there. And, those seven people lived there.

[PF:] And before, the siblings were scattered across the family[']s places], right?

[RS:] Yes, yes, here, there, and there...

[PF:] And you had been born then already, and were with your parents? Because you were the youngest.

[RS:] Yes, I am the youngest.

[PF:] And in your school years, was it as poor at [your] home, or better a little?

[RS:] No, in my school [years], it was all the same thing. All was poverty. All was poverty, and I don't want to speak of the other details, 'cause... // But such were the precepts of the pre-war Poland. there was no treatment with kid gloves, like today. Now, they're fondling, there are strikes, and whatever else... // I don't know, but I cannot suppose, I did not see anyone going on strike before the war. That was unthinkable at all, so it seems to me. Such things as a strike, that's, at all... // And there were none in the communist time. In the communist years, that was a different cup of tea. They'd simply boss you, thrash and beat, and give you a good kicking, and throw you away to Siberia, end of story. But before the war, so it seems to me, it was simply unthinkable for something like to happen...

[PF:] And when the war broke out, were you still going to an elementary school?

[RS:] When the war broke out, when the Warsaw Rising... // No, no, just a moment. During the peace time, until the year thirty-nine, I then had completed two grades of elementary school, I think. Then, the war and German occupation, in Obozowa Street. There's a school in Elekcyjna street, and I frequented that Elekcyjna place. There I attended the third, fourth, probably, and fifth... And I left, when it was already so, already so bad... // Wait, did I still go to Koło right before the war? 'Cause it's, yes, in Marymont, let it be one grade there. Later, in that Gostyńska Street, the second one – that's two grades. But that was... // Then, I must've

attended the Koło place still before the war. And, it was only... And later on still, a year, I think. In any case, I sorted out five grades during the occupation period all right. But later on, as I was sent by my parents to the countryside, for there was poverty, big one, and the occupation at all, five children at home, this, and that. Although the kids [were] grown up, big yet.

[PF:] And did your sisters study too? Did they work?

[RS:] No, they didn't study, they worked yet. They worked, like, casually. They were without a profession too. And one was a needlewoman. Had a work, like, better one. And the rest, that's, such, such... just as they caught [the opportunity]. And, why am I so resuming [it]? Because after my arrival from the occupation, I came from a family's place, right before the Warsaw Rising. ... My mum brought me along. Because at home, the situation was that I could return, in a sense. // Aha, because the schools, // when they send [you] to the countryside, I then could learn nothing in the country, could I, only I did there those rural works. But they wouldn't send me to school. Due to this, my mother wanted to rescue me, so I shouldn't lose the school, then she came to take me... // There was no more... // The father. // The father was no more there.

[PF:] Did he die during the war?

[RS:] He did.

[PF:] And did he die a natural death?

[RS:] He did. A death of some sort of disease. Either he had an ulcer, or something, I don't know. In any case, once my mother came to fetch me there, in the countryside, she took me then in order for me to go to school. And grade six, I can remember, grade six I was admitted to, in Marymont. And at that time, it was so that you didn't have to have your seven grades completed. Six grades was enough for you to go on. The interesting thing is that I had all those papers, somehow surviving. My mother must have saved them. For later on, when already after the war, past the camp, when I arrived in Poland, then, on the basis... // Aha, and there I completed, in that Wetzlar, the one-[year]-and-a-half of the *gymnasium* [i.e. junior high school], then on the basis of these papers and those mine ones from Wetzlar, I was admitted here for a gymnasium and a mechanical lyceum. In Traugutta [St.; corrects himself in the following sentence]. The Traugutt Park. And I already began.... // And I finished the gymnasium and lyceum. And I got a Mechanical Technician [qualification]. And that's all I could do. [*laughs*]

The work done by his father, brother, and sisters, his 'staying kept' at his countryside family lodging, procurement of an apartment in a workers' housing estate in Koło area, interrupted elementary-level education course: these are the main threads of this fragment of Roman's autobiography. They are penetrated and combined with the whole family's common grappling with poverty. It is poverty that overrides the experiences, of all sorts, from the life in the country under Occupation, in the occupied Warsaw, which was named for that time – by someone else – the 'death paragraph' city.³²⁶ Here, we would not learn a thing on this very subject.

326 See Tomasz Szarota, *Okupowanej Warszawy dzień powszedni*, Warszawa 1973, p. 26.

It is even difficult, also my Interviewee finds it hard, to settle which of the events he is evoking occurred before and which after September 1939. It is irrelevant for him, as long as not much changed after this date in terms of his primary experience. Continuity, or continuum, of poverty remains in the foreground. This story is ingrained in experiencing poverty, rather than in the history.

The poverty of his own family is not seen as a unique, unfair situation which would make them distinguishable in any way. On the contrary: it is a normal manifestation of “the precepts of the pre-war Poland”. His family was quite lucky anyway: his brother got a job as a stoker and a flat in a housing estate ‘for the workmen’. This allowed for drawing his parents and siblings “from hell to heaven”, for gaining a foothold in Warsaw – not yet getting strongly anchored, though, as Roman Strój was at times sent to his family’s countryside place not only to spend his holiday there.

That they had no firm ground under their feet is also, possibly, betrayed by the comment on strike. Roman’s brother and father were both peons; what is more, the father only did casual work. This kind of employment must have been unreliable, anyone of them could lose his job overnight. The same was true for the sisters. On the other hand, every day of labour was indispensable to support the family. What fell to their lot, then, was to care about the work they had got with much difficulty, and to do everything so as not to lose it. Going on strike was unconceivable. Roman internalises such assessment of the situation – possibly, the one that was prevalent at his home – and generalises it by extending it to the situation of workers across the country. He also extends it to the post-war years, ‘the communist time’, although he emphasises the differences in the consequences caused by a strike offence of the sort. No matter the historical facts that could be contraposed to such generalisations. The important thing is that they add meaning to a biographical experience in which going on strike was a privilege of the workers’ elite, inaccessible to ordinary workers.

This close-up on the situation of his family before the war and during the Occupation is permeated by submissiveness – acceptance of one’s fortune, hard labour, necessity to discontinue the education, poverty... This is the way the world goes, and one has to accept it.

The possibility of getting educated with a decent Polish gymnasium, in Wetzlar, and the Warsaw follow-up, crowned with a secondary technical education degree, is a considerable success of his life. It is a social advancement, the maximum of what he managed to achieve – or, in the Interviewee’s own perspective, “that’s all I could do”.

Were it not for the concentration camp, with the vocational training and factory work episode, and reentering the role of school student when already in a transit camp, the advancement could have not ever occurred. And, Roman would probably not have been willing to enter this role, had he been a little older and healthier at the liberation, as were some of his camp mates whose social (and economic) situation was similar. Soon after they returned, they were not strong or intellectually fit enough to learn; shortly after that, they had to work to provide for themselves.

Stories on clandestine teaching or genuine lessons held under false but official and allowed names, are well known to us: secret courses and lessons, devotion and courage of teachers, and how illegal students were determined to learn and study. They appear in a number of memories, are featured in school history textbooks, and have got excellently solidified in Polish collective memory. However, one would not find such comforting images in Roman Strój's narrative. It is not because he was too small then to share this experience: various forms of Polish secret teaching behind the German facade were applied from higher grades of primary school upwards.³²⁷ The reason was, apparently, Roman's 'broken' course of education: he would often go from one school to another, and discontinue his learning by often being forced to travel to the countryside. Studying or learning is not placed at the story's centre, and probably was not his central experience. It would not have at all been possible. Poverty, and concern about not getting overcome by it, was the actual focus. The parents found it tough to think about having their kids educated; or, in case they gave thought to it, they could do very little. After all, Roman recalls his mother's determination: when his father died, she took the son from the village in order to have him join the last, sixth, grade of primary school. This must have cost her considerable effort.

My Interviewee's memory has not preserved much from the experiences of school education in the occupied Warsaw; there is, however, one pronounced image remaining. Since it does not reminisce a camouflaged lesson of Polish, history, or geography, it seems even more worth of being quoted now:

[RS:] I can remember it, in that Elekcyjna place, in the elementary school, everything there was just normal, such as... The point is, the German language had entered yet. I was grade four there, I should think, and the German language was compulsory then. And the lecturer, I don't know, a Pole, or... // But in any case, the German language was there already. And besides, well ...? // There, in grade six, I... // Because I completed grade six before the Warsaw Rising We then had a Religious Instruction and Singing man [i.e. teacher]. He was a Hitlerite, he normally wore that *Hakenkreuz*, but a civilian he was.

[PF:] A *Volksdeutsch*, or a German?

[RS:] In fact, a *Volksdeutsch*-and-German, sort of, damn it. And he was mad about religion. But a Hitlerite he was.

[PF:] And later, he taught you Religious Education, right?

[RS:] He taught me Religious Education... He didn't teach me Singing, for he was a Singing professor, in grade six, here in Marymont, in Marii-Kazimiery St. And everybody was startled that the two could be [combined] together...

When still in the camp, in Mauthausen was I, mind you, I was saying my prayers so much. For praying was the only chance to survive. One of the very few chances. And I thank God the Lord, and particularly Our Lady, that I have

327 See T. Szarota, op. cit, pp. 115 ff.

survived. ... And the thing is that when I was at Mauthausen, and not only, in that *Abeitskommando*, then, thanks to his singings, his religious singing instruction... // Because, he, only religious songs, and no other... [*laughs*] Well, 'cause you could move in there. It was plausible that he was a Hitlerite, and hence, *At the cross her station keeping Stood the mournful Mother weeping, Faithful cross*, etc., that had nothing to do with some anti-Hitlerian custom. That was all with God the Lord or with Our Lady. There, it was allowed. 'You can!', you were told. And thanks to it, me, // you can say, that gave me a real lot. Because I was experiencing this my own way, and the other matters could not stand it psychically and psychologically, when only it was. In a culinary manner too, 'cause they ate bones with veins, and that was not allowed. They drank the blood, and so on. Well, such was the situation.

Of the several years of his school education, only this lesson appeared memorable; for Roman, the lesson proved pretty unique. Not just because it was taken by a particular teacher who taught Religious Instruction and (religious) Singing, simultaneously overextending 'Nazi' pedagogic rules; even more so because he considers those lessons the most important ones he has ever been through. The prayers he was taught at that moment helped him survive the camp, perhaps becoming crucial to his survival. Singing and reciting them in the camp, he believed they were reaching their destination. Addressing the recipients, he took his mind, even if for a while, off the surrounding hell of the *kacet* reality. And, he never quit his hope that he would be saved till liberation comes. A pariah in the camp's social world, particularly in that moment of its existence, he could not and was not capable of undertaking more to improve his position or situation. That was his only weapon. Its uniqueness helps sharpen contours of the reminiscence, and adds the camp prayer – and, consequently, the belief in God – a profound autobiographical meaning. It also causes that strong emotion accompanies this particular fragment of the narration.

Following the path of pre-camp experiences, constitutive as they were for the Interviewee's identity and solidified in his memory, we have found ourselves within the camp space again. We have been led into it along the thread of biographical narration; but let us get out of this labyrinth, in our continued search for Roman's biographical experiences from his post-camp period. The task is not easy. Roman is not quite inclined to talk about those 'empty', regular years. He finds it hard to believe that this ordinariness and lack of special events is of interest to me, and is worth talking a story about. Or maybe, rather than being unconvinced, he cannot quite do it.

A relatively easy move is to be back for a while with the Wetzlar transit camp and the biographical crossroads – the decision of returning to Poland, and the return itself. These are the turning points in this biography, perhaps the most important ones, beside the camp experience. It is not surprising that the memory, which is now working so intensively, resumes those experiences, finding new access to episodes that have only been touched upon before. We can now learn a

number of factual details about the camp, the conditions prevalent therein, social relationships, etc. – as well as his episode as a student at the Polish *gymnasium*.

[RS:] But a majority, there, were, those professors [in Wetzlar – PF's note], were AK-men, contemporaneously AK-men. And they set as a goal for themselves to create a gymnasium and a lyceum, because such were their qualifications. And the UNRRA, the camp one, chimed in: all right, go do it. ... So, it was like this: three Polish women professors, of a really great standard, but great patriots [they were] too, oh good gosh...

[PF:] So, was it that regular lessons were held there?

[RS:] Normal lessons, like any school, all that, registers being kept. All that with chicanery, or even more so, for they, those, were demanding. Those were not just ladies, like, blah-blah tiny-little-things....

And so, those also were German, former German barracks. And it was made in the way, the rooms were four-, [or] two-bed, either ground-floor or two-storied. But, no, // it was bearable there, you wouldn't say. And, the alimentation was wonderful already, American. ... The UNRRA, all was UNRRA, and UNRRA once again. So, the feeding was super. Whatever was back there [i.e. in the (most recent) past], you cannot compare it at all. That's, at all, a real far cry.

A reminiscence of one tough-to-make decision reappears now with greater severity. New contexts of the moment are appearing – firstly, poverty experienced in Poland before his imprisonment. Roman's camp period was one when poverty he had experienced as typical, daily and domestic was suspended. Now, poverty is back, in front of his eyes, frightening away. This comes as an extremely rare reminiscence of that particular biographic moment: so scarce are the accounts, not to say written-down memoirs, of almost-excluded people ranked low in the social hierarchy, those for whom want a thoroughly fundamental experience of their youth years, or perhaps even their whole lives. Such people usually do not tend to write books of memoirs, get interviewed, or have their biographical accounts recorded. It is harder to get through to them, to listen to them and record the words they utter. Thus, their specific experience easily perishes, remaining out of sight.

A lot [of people] were returning to Poland. But those who had a connection with the Germans, in some sort of positive way... // If there was a Pole working, say, at a *baor's* [= 'Bauer', a German farmer employing coerced labourers] and was treated well by the *baor*, then he'd prefer to stay there, and wouldn't return to Poland...

But I've once mentioned about the fact that many a Pole have remained because they fared well. As he compared the Polish conditions in which he lived, then, well, that's a far cry. Then, there he was, should I know who? And this is exactly why those Poles were remaining, for the economic and cultural reasons, and in any other respect too. There was such a train, electric one, like the one in this place, well, the electric one that goes to Podkowa-Leśna [a locality near Warsaw; today, part of Warsaw Agglomeration]. A same one is from Mannheim to Heidelberg. And I used that train too, 'cause I went to a doctor, the eye problem. And, you know, sir, I'm meeting two

Poles in the compartment. And, [there's] a discussion between them, they didn't know I also was a... // that I was on my way back from that... // And there, there was, such a, German woman sittin', a nice girl, but this is not the point... // The point is, the way they behaved. They said in this way: 'We're not going to Poland. For there's poverty in Poland.' Their background was, precisely, some poor... // 'Poverty, and we're not willing to return to that poverty. We're staying here.' Well, and that's enough. For there's poverty in Poland. That means, he, as he lived before the war, // for those were the lads who were then about, let's say, thirty, and this means, lived before the war – meaning, he must've [lived] there in, like, a poverty. Perhaps there were five of them at home, one cow or one goat. And, such [were] the conditions. Because we know, don't we, that this is what was in our villagery [*sic*] houses, that half the house was a cowshed and the other half, a hut. And you entered it, normally, from the porch, here was the entrance hall, a cow and hogs there, and there were you. Those were the conditions you lived in. When I still was on [= during] the occupation, at that uncle's, then he had the same situation. That the cows were on the left-hand side, and on the right-hand side, us.

This picture from a train trip tells us more of Roman's apprehensions than about the Polish passengers he came across on his way. It is not their but his own poverty that we find evoked at this moment: five brothers and sisters at home, a home that is shared fifty-fifty with cattle – identical to the one he visited at his uncle's family.

While retaining in his memory his own experiences from his stay in the countryside, he extends them to the overall situation in Poland. The misery of this situation is reinforced in contrast with the farmsteads of German famers which he probably saw through the train's window and knew from the stories told by Polish coerced farm labourers. He probably met some of them in the transit camp. Based on this fragmentary knowledge, the narrator constructs an idealised and simplified image of 'baor conditions'. For a prisoner who had just, and quite luckily, been released, and who bore a wealth of pre-war experiences of such a sort, these conditions could indeed have seemed to be a 'heaven', when juxtaposed with the camp 'earth' he had just left. It is this same contrast that he builds the image of farmhand on: a whizz-kid who was given an admission ticket to another, better world. Between his own experience and the imagined experience of the other there occurs a divide, abysmal gap, upon which his own identity as a *kacet*-man is reinforced. The experiences of labour 'at a *baor*'s' – the less positive ones, similar to his own – are perishing.³²⁸

328 There is no point arguing that moments of this sort were also part of the general experience. For the sake of contrast (and balance too), it is worth however to cite here a fragment from the account of one coerced farm labourer: "They drove us to East Prussia. I was brought to Heilsberg, a small town – that's German; and in Polish, Lidzbark-Warmiński. And there, one carriage of us. We were told to get off, and there, in that Lidzbark, we were shown into a cinema. I can remember the seats. And we sat down in those seats, and the Germans came in, one by one, and selected.

The recollection of his return to Poland and of experiencing the Polish poverty is also founded on an opposition: this time, against each of those 300,000 Poles who remained in Germany after the war (this number is, emotionally, evoked again). It is preceded by a mention of his way back to the homeland:

Well, you have to admit that the UB [= Security Office, the Polish communist secret police] were trailing you everywhere. And there, the Jews [*unclear*], I don't know why. I have no antipathies, of any sort, whatever, but Jews appeared everywhere. In that Dziedzice, that major or captain, he was a Jew. And as the Jews travelled with us, for there were Jews travelling with us too – Poles, but Jews [i.e. of Jewish background]... They were carrying some leather, a leather, sort of, to make boots with, and various things; a whole carriage. Then, he talked to them, rather, at all. And they were brazen enough to tell us the same thing we were once told by [? ..], that now, it's us to rule here, not you. So... // And so, that major heard this too, and, mum's the word. So, you could clearly see there was something's not quite right. Well, but...

But all was held in rather bearable conditions, acceptable. Well, what should you say; there was the war, the war-over, right? A mess unearthly, all that. So, I shouldn't be complaining about anything, You cannot, well, you cannot, in those conditions. What's it that you're after? Being brought back in a sedan chair?

My Interviewee's memory has not retained too many details of that journey. They must have appeared not quite essential. The significance of that experience is contained within the objectivising generalisation: it was 'acceptable' and you cannot complain – it would not be fair for you to do so, as all this took place

And me... // I don't know, something came over me that I'd hide myself under the seat, so, there were the others first that they were selecting, selecting... and that my *Bauer* noticed it, cam over, and told me to go out of there. And what hurt me the most severely... 'cause there was, a sort of, secretary or clerkess... He brought me to her and took off fifty marks. He paid for me, and signed something. And that was awfully painful for me, the fact I [was purchased] like a slave, for marks. I'm being sold for, precisely, the marks. And well, he brought me there, to that farm of his. He had a nice building there. He had a, sort of... // must've been ten rooms or so, and he told me to spend the nights together with the horses. There was, such a... made up of planks, in the corner, and that also [were] measly conditions, for the floor [was] concrete, of cement, a small barred window... And there was, such a... // made up of planks, like, to sleep on. And it was awfully stinky there. Then, well, the horses, horses were standing opposite, some twenty horses there, and cows were on the other side. And that manure which was there, and all that. You had to breathe that in. Because, the known thing: the enemy, and that's... The fact he had ten rooms, then he could've given one off, exactly, to the Pole. There would've been, well, some sleeping, eating, and everything. And there, he... // Well, that's how he treated the Pole, like some animal.'; account of Tadeusz Brzeczko, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. ISFLDP_009 (recorded by Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner).

shortly after the war. This rationalisation lowers the level of expectation, which is set rather low anyway. Once again we find Roman accept his destiny that fell to his lot. Those without such humility have a different memory of that route. Made in similar conditions, their trip is 'inacceptable', is a scandal of history.

More important than this generalisation is the only episode Roman has just evoked. What is it that made this particular detail stand, out of the whole journey? It might be the fact that it is excellently of use in confirming his own conceptions, opinions, and stereotypes adhered-to. My Interviewee has again caught Jews red-handed, discerning their impudence: they have ganged up on the Poles, want to rule them, made a killing – now they are carrying a whole carriage of leather to make boots and various other things of... And, there is a plenty of them everywhere. They, 'Poles, but Jews', are crowding in here, crushing into our place – the one of simply-the-Poles, pure Poles. It is as if they were not returning to their places and their country, but invading and occupying our country. It is clear that something is going on wrong here, but it is hard to completely explain. Something is wrong with the Jews, obviously, not with the observer narrator. The latter remarks at the very beginning, just in case, that everything is all right with him, he is an unprejudiced and objective man, in any case; but still before this remark is made, we can learn that there were Jews 'everywhere' within the UB secret police that were trailing you everywhere. Both recollections merge into one, for their meaning is the same.

Let us now move to this Interviewee's other post-war experiences. In order to better understand his situation after he was back in Poland, the history of his family is worth recalling. Whilst not a piece of memory of Roman's own experience, this knowledge is part of his autobiography:

And we were in Marymont during the occupation. ... Marymont was burnt up after the Uprising. These were barracks there, those were wooden houses, mind you. ... All that Marymont which presently is there is, after all, completely dissimilar to the one that was. Because it was, wasn't it, Marii-Kazimierzy was a wooden street [i.e. with wooden houses]. So, what was there? As the Uprising was coming to an end, then, everybody [*unclear*]. And my sisters, and our mom too, were included in that general pool for the transportation. But the luck wanted them to be carried away to a countryside, to Kielce region somewhere. And they lived at some villagers' place there. And since that one sister, Stefa, knew the tailoring, the dressmaking, then, well, the sewing at once there. And they were there, somehow, the three of them. One of these sisters was somewhere, damn it, now it's hard for me to say... // that youngest one. Exactly, that's what I don't know. For Bronia, Stefa [diminutives of the Christian names Bronisława and Stefania, resp. (Transl. note)] and my mother were somewhere in that Kielce region. But where that one was? Somewhere, perhaps, with the family, in Kielce region somewhere there, too. ... In any case, after the war, // after the Warsaw Uprising [my brother] was back. And all returned. The thing is, my sister was lucky as – one of them – she was member of the WSM Żoliborz [Warsaw Housing Cooperative, Borough of Żoliborz]. And she got an apartment. Because she was, // she had a right to. The law was still existent and the law was observed, shit, that was

marvellous. You wouldn't even believe it now, that such moments could be the case now. Coming to Warsaw, and getting a dwelling. And Warsaw's all debris. [*laughs*] Well, after all, a professor of a sort, or another, like, dignitary, would say, 'What's that, and how about me? Am I to sleep in a tent? And she's going to... in there?' The law was the law. She's a member of the WSM and a flat is allocable to her. And well, that's what it was like.

Let us bear in mind that Roman Strój did not return to Warsaw immediately after the war but only in 1947. And thus, he is recalling a family memory at the moment. Save for their father, his family have survived the war; dispersed after the Uprising, they reunited in Warsaw afterwards. His sister's dwelling in Żoliborz is the key feature in this story. The receipt of this accommodation is constructed as a lucky occurrence in the family, and an act of justice. The narrator eagerly and incredulously tells us that honest law was in force then, that the previously contracted obligations were kept. The most unbelievable, 'marvellous' thing for him is that the law proved efficient with regard to his own sister, who was, after all, an ordinary human being, and a poor one too – like the whole family. Not a professor, not a dignitary; and she made it all the same! His abstract comparison of the justice of that time against the injustice, lawlessness of today leads my Interviewee to the conviction that nowadays, something of the sort would certainly not be possible.

This image gives us insight in social distances – or, putting it stricter: in the way Roman feels and experiences them. There is an elite on the one side – with their sense of superiority: their interests come ahead of the law, or the law stands at their service. On the other side, at the opposite pole, are people from his own social universe: subordinate, dependent, with no social capitals attainable, doomed to work hard, getting paid peanuts. This opposition – in various scenes, less clearly sometimes – reappears in many a place in this narrative, not just in reference to this particular biographical moment.

Thus, Roman had somebody and someplace to return to. Many Varsovians returning from Nazi camps were not as lucky, though.

[RS:] And I arrived in Warsaw, and reported at the, sort of, point – I think it was called a 'PUR'. What was it called?

[PF:] Repatriation Office. The Polish National Office of Repatriation.

[RS:] The office, this is, exactly... [*pointing at the documents*] The PUR. And there I reported, in Warsaw, in Jerozolimskie Avenue or somewhere, and they gave me something there too. Some clothing, partial, sort of, that is: a cap, a sweater, or something. And, a few pennies, or some slice of bread. In any case, there was something, there. And with that 'there was something', I returned home and, well, began hanging around...

[My mother] lived together with my sisters in Żoliborz, in Próchnika Street. And I came along there; there also was the situation that one room and a kitchen, damn it... And there were the four of us – meaning: myself and the two sisters and mom.

[PF:] And your brother already lived...

[RS:] My brother already lived in Kolo, in Obozowa St., all the time. Because those blocks[-of-flats] were not destroyed by the war or the Rising. They survived. A strange thing, they survived.

[PF:] And what did you live on?

[RS:] Well, this is it. There, the situation was such: on various welfare funding, which-ever functioned at the time. And besides, one of them, as I told you, that Stefa sister, she's dead now, in fact, all are dead beside me [laughs]... I have still remained. And all that is [= those are] already down in the ground. There is Stefa the sister, who did the sewing; she was the best. My brother had it out of his hair, for he already formed a separate family, and worked as a stoker, in year twenty, in Obozowa St. He remained ... after the war, 'cause we're talking, after the war, right?

[PF:] That's right.

[RS:] There still were the two sisters remaining, and me. And the mom. And so, as we already lived in... In Kolo... // Just a moment, what was it like? We were moving, from Kolo to Marymont once, but I think from Marymont to Kolo too. In any case, as far as work is concerned, then the work was the following only: my brother's, that one [= his job] was reliable, but he already had a family – a wife and a son. And we had that sister, who was the tailor and she manages [= managed] the things well. And she had to carry a great burden. For my mom went to, sort of, subsistence allowances, meaning, like, a casual job. Looking after something for somebody, tidying, this, that. The sort of thing. And my dad, already... // Because the dad was dead yet. He was no more with us after the war. So, there was me, my sister Hela who died later on too, in Żytnia Street, there. But this is yet, the thing. // And there remained, without Hela, the following; me, Bronka, Stefa, mom. Then, for these four persons... Mom, from time to time; Stefa did something as a tailor; and Bronka also, irregularly, somewhere... And me – well, to a school, possibly. And I didn't work, anywhere. And that's what it was like. Well, you were, somehow, hard up there, sort of.

No symbolical scene of greeting, entering the home, meeting the mother has been evoked. He is preoccupied with something else: the miserable financial situation of himself and of the rest of the family, in the first place. Although Roman spent a dozen or so post-war months in the transit camp conditions, which were not the worst possible, given the circumstances of the time, the first episode he spontaneously recollects from Warsaw is his turning up at the Repatriation Office to get some clothing and food there. The reminiscence further on unfolds along this track.

Now that the war is over, the concentration camp and transit camps are all over, one has to return to his or her place in the social map of the city. The place is not comfortable – and still it will be his lot to labour a real lot to maintain it. 'Being hard up' is a tough and tiresome activity – particularly for a mother and sisters working on joint account; this includes the upkeep of Roman, so he could stay away from having to work immediately, and study for some time.

His delayed return from Austria and Germany becomes a biographical issue: a foothold for official suspicion. Enforced contacts with representatives of authorities,

meetings and talks around this particular point, have thus become part of Roman's experience. This is yet another example of a more general practice, rather than some isolated case.

[RS:] Because it was like: as I only attended the gymnasium, then later on, as we completed that gymnasium and the lyceum, then we had... // Those who completed that school had a referral to Piła, on the higher officer, automotive, school. And as I went there, together with those schoolmates, there were examinations, various, a board there was, like. And they found that I couldn't, to that school, // I couldn't. For many reasons. I had been in the camp, and that's already a crime, same thing as under Stalin. Those who were in the camp were traitors of the homeland, and such were hanged, or driven to a taiga. And same thing there. In that Piła, they found it that the thing... // Because my father, after World War One, also had been in that poverty, he set off together with my mother to do seasonal work in France. Then, they called my father a 'freethinker'.

[PF:] And that's what they dragged out to hold against you, right?

[RS:] They dragged [it] out [against] me, in an opinion [stating] that I couldn't be in that school. And now, 'How come, you've been in Austria?' Once they heard: Austria, that was the end, completely. 'In Austria? And what, what did you do in that Austria?' I say, 'Well, I was in the concentration camp, Mauthausen'. 'And in Mauthausen you were too?' That's what they were, this sort of a standard. Either they had to be such, or they were such. And of those boors on that board, there were, to be exact, eight, I think. Eight, at least. And the opinion like that, and, later: 'Then, you shall get back again to Warsaw and report at the point that has referred you to us here, and thank you for...' But I'm saying, 'Well, but what's next?' 'You'll be told it there.' Well, then I came over here, to Warsaw, and they're telling me. The headquarters was in Szucha Avenue, the one that sorted these matters out. They say, 'So now, given the situation you are in...' ... And I had by then taken a job in that Light Industry Design Office. And the story was such that as I was, from that military there, from Piła, then I should have ... come back to work, to that office. But I had earlier on to report at that military point in Szucha Avenue. And well, I'm telling them that the situation is this or that, and, 'What should I do?' And they [reply], 'You do nothing, just wait till we give you.' Same thing as those ones from the AK [Home Army], the Warsaw Uprising. 'You wait, you'll see.' And there was nothing. The luck was mine, perhaps, 'cause I would've perhaps been dead. ... So I'm waiting and waiting, and should've reported at work. This is because when I was sacked from the army, then, well, to the work! The labour's ready to take. And that's, moreover, the commune [*komuna* – i.e., colloq., the communist system], and so on, it's no picnic. And I had the alibi that I had reported there and they told me, you move nowhere from here, mister, just wait at home till you're ordered. Then, I'm waiting. There's a month passing, two [months] passing, three [months] passing. And once, a mage from that office, for I'd got to the job [*sic*] together with him, says, 'Roman, you come over to work, 'cause one they get to know that you are, holy smoke, doing nothing, just...' Because there was something like the wage was going on, or something? Well, for I was drafted, in this

kind of sense, right? Holy mackerel, eh? I'm saying, right you are, that's a tragedy. And well, I'm dashing forth, might and main. I'm reporting at that personnel lady in that institution, and she says, 'Well then, it's good you've come here. Then, well, you start your labour tomorrow. Then, you'll register with that engineer man, he'll instruct you what you're supposed to do in here.' A nice thing, I'm already approved, have my case settled. There, with those military-men of Szucha Avenue, to a degree; not quite, rather. And well, I'm waiting, and the waiting is at it is, that there's no signal given. Or even if there were any, so what? I'm employed already.

The stay in the camp and, even more so, his stay in the West after the liberation turns out to be an important element in Roman Strój's biography. Not just for himself, and for an entirely different reason. By virtue of political decisions, he begins bearing the imprint of a suspect, uncertain, 'dodgy' man. Thereby, he appears not fit for certain roles and cannot enter certain social environments, particularly, the military. Someone has to pronounce and decree this incapacity. Roman clearly evokes a board consisting of 'at least eight boors'. He has memorised them well because, as might be guessed, they have gravely altered the course of his life, or career path, in any case. He tries to interpret their attitude, but the interaction he describes was too short for him to be able to recognise the possible distance they might have had to the role they played with respect to him. He is giving them a chance, for maybe they had to behave like that.

Characteristic of this account is that when Roman shows any repressions of the 'commune' period, he usually evokes Stalin, Siberia, taiga, etc. Such juxtapositions and comparisons give a common denominator to all those experiences, which makes it easier for him to emphasise his distance to the system as a whole. This is clearly the case at this moment too. Yet, his particular case, like many similar ones, is clearly different from the situation of Russians liberated in the camp, which is familiar to him. What he (and his peers) is being through is, in any case, a smaller calibre of repression. All that ends at not admitting the man to a military school. The higher-tier authority, in Warsaw, loses interest in his insignificant case, leaving him uncertain of whether, and when, another opportunity to land a job somewhere might come.

There indeed appears an opportunity to 'land', but someplace else: a peculiar reversal of his expectations. A moment after the previously evoked image, the memory reminisces a situation of Roman being prevailed upon to join the communist party. Again, a typical experience and related story construction known to the reader:

Well, they wanted, asked why I am not with the Party, that I should join the Party ranks, at least the youth organisation. And later, I was too old to be youth, too young for the Party. For this is what it was like, as a matter of fact. In any case, it was not like I'd be asked, but when I worked in the WSK [i.e. the Okęcie factory], there was one such that asked, a Party man: 'Colleague ..., comrade, we would be glad to see you with our organisation.' But [that] was not forcefully, just like that. A buddy, as if, this

and that, as if, but: you sign in, then you'll be with us. But I didn't sign in, it went on somehow. And the Party passed by me.

The headhunting image is back with us: he is being softly persuaded, by a workmate, coaxing, exerting soft pressure... The response is a no less soft 'marking time' strategy, dodging the pressure and hiding from it. It proves efficient in this case: the enlistment eventually fails, the recruitment action is suspended, the Party has 'passed by' Mr Roman Strój. Not for good, though; it is back with him one day, in a different experience:

[RS:] Well, in spite that I had to do with the Party. Because this very flat, which I now have here, this was a story of the sort that I was attendance-listed, // for accommodation, // as the last, tenth. And there lived a Jew. Who, when those riots were, ... of March [1968], then they had the privilege of leaving abroad. And he went to Argentina. And that was a tied accommodation.

[PF:] And who was that man?

[RS:] An engineer, manager of a department. But, as it was, he was a Jew too and used it [= the opportunity], and he went away to that Argentina. And the apartment, well, remained. And I, being the tenth in the accommodation list, caught it. For even the *partyjniaks* [colloq., communist party members] couldn't believe I dwelled like that. 'Cause I lived with my mother-in-law in Grochowska St., and there the conditions were such that your brain is fried. They couldn't believe it when they came in. They said, 'You, Roman, show us that flat, we'll make up some board, because it's impossible that you live there.' And well, once I had an opinion like that... // Well, that's the way you live now.

Now, the point is not about persuading him to join the Party: it is about outwitting it. In the short story Roman is building about how he eventually won his apartment – the same in which we are having our conversation – he plays the part of a stowaway. He has no party ID, and is not an officially registered beneficiary of the system. In spite of this, he draws out of this system significant benefits for himself – getting an old-tenement-house apartment located in the very downtown area of Warsaw. Initially, the last on an 'accommodation attendance list', he is served on a priority basis. The informal system rules privileging the party members, the recognised individuals, get suspended for a while. This becomes possible by virtue of interpersonal – and human – relationships that get organised otherwise than merely along the division line between the party-member elite and the 'remainder'. It namely becomes apparent that the '*partyjniaks*' followed the impulse of the heart and, following a site inspection at the narrator's previous dwelling, eventually admitted him to participate in the distribution of profit. Thus, he 'caught it', saving his face and good conscience for himself.

The language used in this fragment of Roman's narration is characteristic to the period and the events he is referring to. This language is a constitutive part of his experience, no less important than the experiences themselves, to which it refers us. 'Accommodation list', 'catch it [an opportunity]', 'board' (or 'committee') and

an 'opinion' it has issued – all these descriptions are part of the communication code in use at that time. Without them, the narrator would not probably be able to recount that situation.

Important to the experience of 'catching' the apartment is its historic context, the events of March 1968. It was the anti-Semitic smear campaign that caused the tied apartment to 'remain' empty and its host to leave Poland. But there is another thread of these occurrences that Roman is evoking: he mentions the 'riots' of March '68 as he probably only means the student protest action (and, possibly, the ZOMO [*Mechanised Brigades of the People's Militia*] and the 'active workers' gangs). His perception is that the students were remonstrating instead of studying, whereas the Jews received the privilege of leaving abroad. Some, the engineer being one example, 'used the opportunity and went away'.

The period's official propaganda language proliferated by the system has got strongly solidified; it has moreover been internalised by my Interviewee, together with his interpretation of the events it referred to. This language perfectly fit his earlier prejudices – and excellently facilitated the adding of autobiographical significance to the acquisition of the apartment Roman has occupied ever since. One finds it more comfortable, after all, to reside in a place that formerly belonged to someone who once 'went away' to Argentina than someone who was threatened and made to leave. Roman is sharing his truth with us; while not much true, this truth is authentic.

The last thread in Roman Strój's biography around which we have managed to build a fairly extensive narrative is his involvement in the milieu of former concentration camp inmates. This is an important thing for my Interviewee, in this phase of his biography; one of the most important of his social activities – perhaps just the most significant one, apart from his family activity. And, consequently, he dwells on it at quite a length.

I could tell you one little anecdote. That I learned in [= from] the press that there's going to be a Mauthausen-men's reunion in Krakowskie Przedmieście St. And there, well, because the time was strongly Party-imbued, everything, no matter where, the chairman had to be a decent member of the Party. And, analogously, the following happened: the people left the meeting. The people left the meeting, they didn't want to take part in that masquerade. For the people had selected their own ones [= representatives], those who were in the camp, and the Party, its own ones. And the Party won. Related to this, as they won, then the others left the premises. And ever since I had a pause, didn't look for anything – until I learned that Arolsen.....

I wrote a letter; they sent me this [*showing me a document issued in 1973*]. And this document participates in all my actions, here in this country. Whatever it might be: whether I am a war veteran, or am this, or am that, whether I'm here. Look, the Union of Fighters [for Freedom and Democracy; abbr. 'ZBOWiD']. All this is based upon that.

His first attempt at getting associated with a veteran milieu ends up in complete failure. Roman is not willing to take part in the activities of the centralised and

politicised ZBOWiD organisation. Since there is no peer organisation around the place, he willy-nilly quits for a good while. Several years after, he comes across another opportunity: this comes, to him and to most of his former camp mates, in the mid-seventies. Let us remind that it was then that a Veterans' Act came into effect at that time, ensuring social rights and benefits to war veterans (before then, regulations existed that warranted the rights to individual groups – but not an act or law). The Act provided that eligibility for such benefits be related to membership with the ZBOWiD (not without exception, though). However, this thread is absent in this narrative; it would not have matched the preceding one. It is obscured by the reminiscence of correspondence exchanged with the International Tracing Service. There is no mention that a certificated obtained from this organisation was primarily used in determining the veteran eligibilities and only afterwards was of use in a number of other occasions mentioned by the narrator. One such occasion is our present meeting, in the course of which we have several times referred to this particular document.

Before we can learn more of the subsequent degree of Roman's involvement in the milieu of former inmates, lasting until now, he would make an important digression – about those survivors who shun any relation with that milieu, and likewise with any form of veteran or combatant self-identification and related activities, institutions, or rituals. Such attitude is at the expense of privileges, an option they quit purposefully, 'walking tall':

[RS:] And, let me still, on the subject... // 'Cause, well, there's been cases... ... Some people who came from the camps entirely ceased any activity. They simply believed that this was enough for them, the activity they had had there.

[PF:] They didn't want to resume this at all?

[RS:] At all, they said it was... And you still can meet ... persons who for instance do not take advantage of the privileges of participating in the gifts. When there were these gifts, which for the camp-men... // Well, margarine... this, that... Such a lad wouldn't want [that] at all, nor... // 'Do not please tuck no stuff in for me.' And the other one, exactly the thing I'm talking about, from the Warsaw Technological University, some professor. And they wanted to suck him into there, into our club, for him to be [there], for he was, like, // such one would be of use, right? He expelled them, just like that, says, 'I want not a word on the topic. I've been in a camp, served my term up, and that's enough for me. And do please not get me meddled in any camp matters.' So, people are what they are. Some follow that pelf, whatever it would be like, while others have more of the ambition, so-called, if you can put it this way. And they say that, 'Thank you, but we've been through what we've been through, and please do not come back to this anymore, for that is played-out and is uneasy on the ear to us.'

It is with admiration that my Interviewee looks at such resolute and tough stance. He assumes for a while the perspective of those who have resolved to take it – a standpoint he ascribes to them as he believes they disdain the German gifts, take offence, rather than 'following that pelf'. He blends this

motivation with another one, which is probably more important, as a matter of fact. Many are not even willing to hear a word on the camp, as every single word opens their non-cicatrised wounds anew, evoking the trauma of the experience.

However, as for himself, he would not work up the attitude the aforementioned professor impressed him with. Roman pursues intense social contacts, and needs to feel the sense of belonging to a community – and the former inmates' milieu satisfies this need, perhaps unlike anything else. This group offers him an opportunity to share his own camp experiences, and of being understood; better than at home. This is the reason why, asked whether he has shared his camp experiences with his family, my Interviewee says:

No, that's the point, no. I don't say. With my colleagues, most of that, with my colleagues. With those that I was in the camp [with] They're alive, and I only talk on this subject with them. ... If you were in the camp, and so was I, and some *Kommandos* comingled there, that you can talk with that one, although he was with the *Kommando* [called] *Zementkommando*, or some sort of another *Kommando*.

The get-along strategy is, for some, remaining silent and getting detaching from those experiences, whilst others seek to share them with others, incessantly repeating, talking up, processing – part of which is co-participated commemoration rituals or trips to sites of memory, to the former camp site.

[RS:] I did it like all the others, remaining ones. [*laughs*] That I persisted, so to speak, as a former concentration camp inmate. All the documents which I could gather, I have gathered. And, well? I am in the Club, am active with the Board. [*laughs*] ... With the Board, but I'm not doing quite well with that. ... I reproach myself, you could say, as I'm not active enough. One could've, 'cause the colleagues [are] younger and sounder than me, 'cause I'm a little ailing all the same, you have to admit. After all, I've got a variety of trouble, the heart, and this, and that, and anything else. Otherwise, who's free of that? Once there's someone grudging, then a camp-man, like, everyone'll say, 'And what d'you think, am I any different? I've got my sicknesses, same way as you do.' But there, at present, there are colleagues in our Club who really ... run the Club nicely, and are healthier, and are willing to work. So, you could only envy them. I am even getting astonished every once in a while. I'd say, 'Yo, bo, what's up there, whatever?' And he'd say, 'You know, someone has to do it, blinking!' 'Very nice, well then. But why's it you that devote so much of that time? You don't have to, do you? No one makes you do it, and still you...' So, we've got a few such active mates in the operation and work of our Club and Association. Well, it's due to their intercession and assistance, activity, in fact, that we've got a banner. And that's what we didn't have. Who would've thought about a banner thing! We have got our camp banner.

[PF:] And, has this milieu of Mauthausen-Gusen prisoners and of all the subcamps always been isolated, or is it that it has recently got isolated, as it is?

[RS:] No, we have always appeared as a Mauthausen Club, and now we're appearing as an association, but the Mauthausen-Gusen Club has been maintained continually. In spite that something's become, a bit, of those... // Association of the Handicapped, no... // Association of Former Nazi Concentration Camp Prisoners. ... Some of the colleagues are members of there, and members of here. ... I have never switched any, I am with this organisation of ours, that is, the Mauthausen-Gusen Club. An association of this kind is there as well. As the Association is, the Club exists the same way. I am a member of one only, the Mauthausen-Gusen Club; whereas some of the colleagues signed up with that club, of those... Former Concentration Camp Prisoners... Former Nazi Concentration Camp Prisoners, and so forth.

[PF:] ... Prisons and Concentration Camps.

[RS:] Yes, and that's another club, as if, and they are with the two clubs. But, the AK [= Home Army] have an advantage, in that some colleagues have the right – who belong to that other one, of here and there – have the right to be treated, for instance, free of charge, within the frame of that club. They've got some club somewhere there, in Solec St.

Roman Strój is member of a club of Mauthausen-Gusen prisoners. The Club has recently obtained legal personality, with the official status of association and a banner. It is unique that former inmates of a remote camp, situated outside Poland (and thus receiving no support or assistance from the site of memory or Museum), grew institutionally, organisationally, and financially separate. They no more have to belong to any other camp prisoner organisations to obtain veteran privileges, so-called damages for imprisonment in the camp and slave labour. My Interviewee participates in this status as he only formally belongs to the association of former inmates of Mauthausen-Gusen.

He strongly emphasises his colleagues' engagement in various Club-related affairs. He can see many of these men around; for some of them, this activity is like a career, pursued with a greater intentness and involvement. The formalities, official businesses related to the functioning of their Association become their personal affairs.³²⁹ Roman is not one of these activists; he prefers to stay in the background.

329 "I militated for the banner. I militated too. Later on, other colleagues did too, of course. We have settled that legal personality, sir, together with Wojtek, and with that Heniek Czarnecki, because he's got an acquaintance, don't know, in his family, a woman judge. And that we have settled. And some of them, sir, 'Oh, what do you need that for, ah, that's no use, is it, how?', and so on. That, you know, that's improper, I'd say. When we were making the banner – it cost fifty thousand, fifty million, and there were some three hundred people, after all, incidentally... Then, I gave one million zloty, for I considered it the proper thing to do, because, ultimately, I'm a crafty man with some other things, but there, what do you say?"; account of Henryk Nowicki, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_018.

He finds excuse in his deteriorated health, but is not sure whether his colleagues are really in a better shape. Those younger than him are very few, born a year or two, or perhaps three, years before him, so this argument somewhat misses the point again.

Like almost all former inmates of former camps, some Mauthausen survivors belong to one, if not both, of the large organisations consociating former camp prisoners. After the ZBOWiD was dissolved in 1990, it was replaced by an organisation named Association of the Veterans [*resp.*, Combatants] of the Republic of Poland and Former Political Prisoners (abbr. ZKRPIBWP), the largest Polish multi-milieu veteran/combatant body. In parallel to it, there emerged another organisation, only gathering the former inmates of Nazi prisons and camps, called Polish Association of Former Political Prisoners of Nazi Prisons and Concentration Camps (abbr. PZBPHWiOK). While distancing itself from the former ZBOWiD, the Association tried to refer to the tradition of a former prisoners' organisation existing immediately after the war, before it was incorporated in the ZBOWiD. These bodies' names are longish, similar to each other, and confusable. Their members tend to get confused about them, and so does my Interviewee; all the more that the divisions, clear a few or a dozen years ago, are getting blurred today: the same people are seen attending meetings of various organisations, and some of them are, in addition, members of the Disabled Soldiers' Association.

However, for the Mauthausen and Gusen inmates, particularly those from Warsaw, their own milieu and Club remains the major point of reference. Today, it is run by its largest membership group – former prisoners from Warsaw transports, carried away to the camp during the Warsaw Uprising and shortly afterwards: specifically, the youngest among them, those aged over eighty today. Many of them got involved in the milieu in the last dozen or so years, when retired; but even earlier on, in the ZBOWiD period, the circle of Mauthausen/Gusen's former inmates was quite individuated. Albeit formally this group was perishing in the centralised countrywide structures, there were strong bonds between the former inmates. This is confirmed e.g. by the accounts of the oldest former prisoners who, though living in different towns, having their jobs and occupations, their own political views and worldviews, exchanged letters and sometimes met in person. Those residing in Warsaw had a fixed place and time to meet: their meetings held on a regular monthly basis turned into an institution that lasted several dozen years³³⁰, and only recently has been formally authorised.

330 Stanisław Grzesiuk, the already quoted author, writes about it in the epilogue of his camp memoirs *Pięć lat kacetu*: “May the fifth is a festive day of Gusen-men. Every year, on 5th May, a nationwide friendly meeting of former inmates of the Gusen concentration camp is held, attended by some two hundred people. Colleagues from all over the country come over to spend a few hours together. The celebration always starts at five p.m., which is exactly the time at which the gate was opened. The colleagues who live in Warsaw meet on the fifth of each month at the Bristol café, upstairs. The date and the place are conventional. Whoever is free and willing,

Roman does not confine himself to this, rather smoothed, story on the community he is member of. Beside the official, surface layer of the group's functioning, he is aware of how complex the interpersonal relations he observes and experiences within it can be. He can see conflicts too – and this is perhaps why he is not one of the most active Club members.

It seems to me that now, it's nearing a normalisation, a settlement yet... One has to pay attention to such positive moments. Because there still are wrongful attempts. It only the West, especially Germany and Austria, were giving some... // What's that called? Some pennies, for that's what you could call it, then, with this as a background, there can... // there could've emerged some nuances still. But there's hope that nothing else will go. And that'll be okay. Because all the time, on the basis, against the background of these, precisely, damages, whatever you'd call it, there's been problems. There were problems. For now, there are none, and there won't be. End of the game now. But there have been problems. Should more be given to those who served two years, or five? Because that's what it was like before. When there was some sort of money, then he who served five years got thirty thousand, and he who served one year got two or three thousand. Well, and now, what it was like that was, then they also wanted to resume this. That is, differentiate between the fives, the threes, the twos, and the ones. And the Germans... // For that's the German job. Because, had the Germans done it like they did, then we'd be having the same ball-up as was there before. Otherwise, now, equally for everyone, and no hassle at all. ...

It's the known thing that, exactly, those *Häftlings*, just like me, the ones like myself, faced the worst situation. Well, 'cause, he'd come over from the Rising, and ... those old *Häftlings* who had been [there] a few years each laughed then at us: 'What are you, there, and stuff, you've come in at the end yet', right? That this is, apparently, a plus card [i.e. a 'trump', strong point], that we've been rotting away for five years now... // Well, rotting away, rotting away, but living. And us, you cannot tell if we'll be alive tomorrow. For we're done if there's the other S[S]-man coming up to us and saying, "Fetch'em here, now." And that's it. All said and done. There's nothing, as I said, the day we were received in Auschwitz, at the muster, where that Höss greeted us, two of them bit the dust. ... And how many hours he'd been there? Was it ten hours, in the camp? And that one, he's been [there] five years, but he is there; but he's living.

There are two main embers of conflict – or, in fact, there is one, with the other stemming from it. The point is, namely, damages, or redress, offered for the time

comes in on the fixed day, in the evening, always finding a dozen or so mates from Gusen. There have been many concentration camps; still, the inmates of none never united at liberty in the way former Gusen prisoners have.”; p. 394. Grzesiuk does not mention what we otherwise know from one of our Interlocutors: a former Mauthausen prisoner and a prominent activist of former-inmate milieu managed the Bristol for several years.

served in the camp. The names are not good and many former inmates cannot accept them, preferring to refer to allowances or benefits, grants, or support.³³¹ The money appeared late – only in the last dozen or so years. With such late coming, by the rule of biology, the assistance only extend to a small proportion of those who have survived the camp.

The last provided money, disbursed in 2001–6, was larger (ca. EUR 7,600 per person) and equally distributed among all former inmates. A different but also equal amount was received by former coerced labourers – industry workers being given different money than agricultural workers.³³² The distribution of these funds triggered big emotion. This has been somewhat alleviated by today; such tensions rarely go beyond the former inmates' circle. One cannot identify such tensions from the outside, especially when watching veterans participating in official celebrations or laying flowers on their colleagues' graves. Traces of various tensions are at times audible, for a change, in biographical accounts.

Roman Strój is one of those former inmates who stayed at the camp for a relatively very short time: less than one year, a 'mere' few months. This is a group of the youngest prisoners, of whom the largest number remain alive nowadays. Roman defends the equality solution assumed with the recent disbursements, whilst criticising differentiated amounts related to the length of imprisonment, as applied before. In order to justify that the equality solution is right, he goes back to his own experiences – the ones of a rank-and-file *Häftling*, wedged in the lower ranges of the camp hierarchy. These particular experiences are already known to us. He also refers to a comparison with the oldest, long-term prisoners, those "rotting away, but living", whereas those from his own Warsaw transport are dying in mass.

A workmate appears again (I will not quote this passage in its entirety), who had spent five years at the *kacet* and did not complain about the conditions prevailing there. "Well, just a moment, then: should such one be paid too? Once he confesses this himself, because he's my workmate". Now, he is called for to give his testimony for the case – as a 'witness for the defence', one can add, for his evidence is meant to confirm that the assumed solution for the damages issue is equitable.

Before then, when the narration mentioned a reminiscence of the arrival at the camp and a meeting with the oldest Polish inmates, we could learn of their 'positive compassion'. Although he never received help from anyone of them, Roman built the

331 "This is no damages, that's erroneously written. This is financial assistance for the lost health. Because of damages, everyone should get a pile."; account of Józef Martynia, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. ISFLDP_015.

332 The amounts of benefits offered by Germany and Austria to various groups subject to repression are detailed on the website of the Foundation for Polish-German Reconciliation, the institution responsible for the disbursements in Poland, at: www.fjnp.pl.

image with appreciation, and with compassion. It seemed clear that he caught the shared lot of the old and young inmates, the numerous differences in the situation of both groups being only due to the shift in time. Here, in turn, with a completely different context of enunciation, the image of long-term prisoners has also changed; what we now learn is that they mocked at, or at least scoffed, the Warsaw youth.

This selective and, so to say, ancillary labour of the memory now offers a reminiscence that helps him make himself (and, possibly, me) convinced that older inmates ought not to receive higher damages. They are morally ineligible. There is no more chance to move beyond the image of an old *Häftling* now being constructed, and to reconsider the fact that before he became so, he had been a young inexperienced *Zugang*, new to the circumstances. He had passed this stage of the camp trajectory – no less cruel than the one experienced by my Interviewee – a few years before then; had he not passed it – thousands of others had so failed – he would not have watched the arrival of *Zugangs* from Warsaw with ‘positive compassion’.

Tension can also be sensed on the other side. Some among the long-term inmates, a sparse group today, are holding grudge because of such equality solution prevailing. For them, this is a manifestation of injustice (encountered once again).³³³ One could probably think of no solution that would have not generated tensions of the like kind: the camp-time recollections and the accompanying emotions are too strong.

Our conversation, lasting four hours, is almost over. Before we are done, I would like, together with my Interviewee, to leave the area of veteran and financial matters and resume, for a while, a more personal story.

Much more than the damages issue, of interest to me is the unsolicited and irrecusable camp inheritance. So, I am asking whether there are dreams, burdensome reminiscences, or other images reappearing, incessantly haunting him. Not only am I receiving an answer to my question: I have improvidently activated one of those nightmarish reoccurring scenes:

Yes, there’ve been, there’ve been, there’ve been [some images reminiscent of the camp – PF’s note]. And that lasted later long. And, just a moment... Even now, I’m getting some unforeseen... My wife would quite often wake me up there, ‘cause I’m

333 “For us, the old prisoners, this is a little disappointing. We’ve got it. We first got it for each month of that backbreaking labour, stay in concentration camps, for every day did we get it. Then, I got a rather good money, but what sort of money is that, thirty-six thousand zloty, [as converted] into the old money? ... Later on, it chanced that all those who were there six or twelve months, or arrived at the end, all had it equalled. ... They were equalised with us. Then, something must be wrong there. And we tacitly bear a grudge, that it is like that.”; account of Adam Stręk, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House’s Oral History Archive, ref. no. ISFLDP_054.

gabbing some things. And, about the camp I did have [some dreams], because as I slept on that American occupation, the mates are saying in the night, “Roman, what’s that there? You’re shouting, ‘Auschwitz’, ‘Oświęcim’, something, ‘Mauthausen’...” Because I caterwauled in the night. Something must’ve been there. Perhaps it was that German’s beating, that *Blockältester*’s, with the poker. Maybe, ‘cause I got my arse kicked by the *Blockführer* too ..., he gave me a hiding. ‘Cause, shit, either I was egged on, or did it myself, couldn’t stand it. There was ... a peeling room for potatoes, carrots, and so on. And there was, such a, machine, it was all revolving, the washing, flushing, scraping was going on. But there was a, like... // a catchment, and all that dirty stuff was going down there. I don’t know if I was egged on, that’s what I cannot tell. Or I did it on my own, out of my own will. Pee. Into that stuff. And one of those Spaniards, fucking asshole, fingered me. Told that *Führer* And he, with such quirt. And, he started fucking whacking me around... that’s what I must say. After three blows, I leaked the second time. All the more that I had nothing to leak with. It’s good that only this happened. And after me, the second one in the sequence, one *Russki*. A *Russki*, a rather elderly guy, he might’ve been over fifty. The guy was, such a, quiet and polite, civilised. As the German walloped him with that, after me, ‘cause I was the first, and he, the second – then he couldn’t, although under Stalin he probably suffered and so on, but something like that he hadn’t ever seen in his life yet, that *Russek*. So, what it must’ve been like in that camp, if a Russian who had a first-hand experience of those hardships of life of that whole Soviet society, couldn’t agree there. He said, “How can a man be tormented like this?” Bloody thing [orig., ‘*wadded jacket*’]. In *Russki* [= Russian], right? He was crying, poor thing, right? And he gave him a bash, like this. On snap, the way they did the beating... // Once he beat, he did so with all his heart. Like one of them [got beaten]. I can remember... Something, there, with that soup, it’s boiling, those huge pots. And something there was mismatched there, and that one came up, and see how he’s sticking one on him! On a worker, *Häftling*. ‘Cross the back, like, so he got a pop-up spot here. A varicose vein, like, finger-long. So really awful. They battered unbelievably. When they weren’t beating, they were not, but once they got their hooks on beating, then...

Camp-related dreams is a subject that frequently reappears in former prisoners’ autobiographical narrations. Some of them can remember their content very precisely³³⁴; others just say they have nightmarish dreams – or, in most cases, had such

334 “I want to tell you that I had a dream, of a sort, I’d like to somehow refer to that dream, I’m talking about those ghastly dreams. I had a dream, sir, that I am in the camp. There’s a car standing by the camp’s exit gate. I don’t know if that is Melk; in any case, something of the sort. A tarpaulin, and bread is there. And I went in under that tarpaulin, to that bread, and the car is starting at some moment and passes through the gate, that is, I’m going away beyond the camp’s area and, sir, my fear, not the thing... My fear about that I’ve found myself beyond the camp’s area and once they catch me, they’ll kill me, as simple as that. You know, and the worst thing that in the camp I could maybe survive still, whereas if they catch me

dreams in the past. Others still say they scream in the night.³³⁵ Mr Strój tries to build a rational justification for his screaming at night. His memory suddenly activates a detailed and very incisive reminiscence, which has never appeared before. The image is detached from its context of space and time: we do not learn at what moment and in which subcamp the scene took place. These details are of no relevance for him; the reminiscence is not governed by the order of facts but by a disorder of trauma. The narrator copes with it. This is a hard-fought struggle, whose result can be nothing more than chasing off the reminiscence before it reappears again, unwanted. But to be chased off, it needs being recounted. Taking on the narrative of that experience and the trauma stemming from it, my Interviewee quits caring about the language; ceasing to accurately select the words and phrases, he disregards the fact that he is being recorded.

The story of his own nightmare turns into a narrative on the nightmare of the camp, on the situation of other *Häftlings* whose situation is similar to his own. The memory has enlivened the image of a Russian inmate being tormented. Roman tries to repeat the man's words and to imitate his crying. This piece of narrative does not completely fit the stereotype he has been constructing so far. He remembers about it, and can see the contradiction. The only thing that remains is for him to regard it as an exception, a deviation from the rule. The Russian man got beaten to the extent that the '*Russek*' burst within him – tough, dauntless, all-resistant man, well-tested and proven by Stalinist regime, by the 'hardships of life of ... [the] Soviet society'. Even he was broken by the Nazi camp, and the trauma triggered by those images has undermined the solidified cognitive patterns.

The narrator's memory, thus carelessly and unwittingly disarmed by me, has led him again to the images from the very core of the camp's reality, although it seemed a moment ago that we had moved far away from them. It has so happened because the core is a point without coordinates; it remains undefined, in time or space terms. It is a distinct reminiscence-and-symbol, quintessence, and extract of my Interviewee's specific experience, which is one of an ordinary *Häftling*, almost

out there, then they'll kill me. And so, sir, the waking up from such a dream – you felt almost happy"; account of Jan Ryszard Sempka, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_036.

335 "You mind that, sir, well, mister Piotrek, I'll, well, give you a simple example. I am somewhere, I was travelling, I travelled with my boys: on a canoeing tour, to the Tatras, because we wander across Tatra Mountains. And I forgot, you know, to warn the people: 'Ladies and gentlemen, as I would, in case, be screaming, then, whoever[s] close to where I am, please wake yourself up, please don't you get scared'. I just forgot to do it, sir – and the company was so good, we played bridge later on, I was there with my younger son. I slept downstairs, and my son, upstairs. But sir, when I'm bawling, it's, you know, as if I were being murdered, literally."; account of Henryk Nowicki, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_018.

a *Muselmann*, who could be clubbed to death at any moment, and in front of whom those already clubbed, humans similar to him, are getting killed.

The outburst of this reminiscence is the last strictly narrative image appearing in this account – but not the very last passage of it. Roman Strój is building a commentary he will add to conclude his story.

I would have all of them [i.e. the Germans (PF's note)] killed off, executed off... [*laughs*] But as time goes on, this is all receding. Receding, receding, and now I'm becoming more, sort of, emollient and tolerant yet. Well, what's up here? You wouldn't tell how I would've behaved. Such discussions are on, between myself and myself [i.e. inside myself]. Yeeah. And still, you can see, some of the colleagues... Because after the camp, I thought then that this circle of those former concentration camp prisoners would have formed, I'm not saying that some specific faction in the society, but, that those would be the other sort of people. Those people have survived that camp ordeals. Then, at any place, whether he be on a job, or be a minister, or be a director, or be a bricklayer, regardless of where he would be, in whatever hierarchy, then he would be that good man. Bullshit! [*laughs*] There's nothing happening.

This is a very sad punchline, although my Interviewee cracks a smile. A disconcerting conclusion also for him, as the smile emphasises his disappointment. The camp experience has apparently gone down the drain: the people have not grown bettered, but maybe even spoiled, destroyed, instead. Roman himself has long felt hatred toward the Germans, and wanted to get them killed. He hoped that from a time perspective, the camp would appear a purgatory for the prisoners who had survived. But that was merely an illusion. He remained convinced that the camp has not purged anyone; just affected, perhaps. The camp has remained what it was for Roman throughout his inmate time: a hell on earth. Not a devilish-human but inter-humanhell.

The camp trajectory has been the extreme stage of his path of life. However, it has not appeared to be a biographical breakthrough or turning point in this path. The place that fell to his lot to occupy in the social universe of the camp came as radical confirmation of his social position in the ordinary, off-camp world. When in the *kacet*, he was a sheer *Häftling*, who was down of his luck most of the time. Although he has never been at the bottom level of social hierarchies, whether before the war and after, he has always stayed far away from any privileged position. Luck has not too often come across him, and in this particular respect he could not much count on meeting it on his way.

Roman has not had much of a say in choosing his paths of life; instead, they were set for him in advance, as if imposed. The only thing he could do was bypass the obstacles, evade blows. There was no option for him to delineate his own biographical routes. My Interviewee's biography is pervaded by determinism – the camp stage being the clearest instance, with the camp not being a reversal but a radical intensification of the mechanisms of a normal social universe, a horrible caricature of it. The positions taken and roles played within it are an extreme variant of the positions and roles from beyond that universe. Such is Roman Strój's

experience. The coordinates of his point of observation (and experience) of both these universes have not changed much with regards to their entireties.

The experience of the camp, understood as a certain whole, the lesson of his life, has left in my Interviewee an unfulfilled, frustrated hope for improvement of the human world. Not an abstract one but the world within reach, the one that is experienced on a daily basis. A moral improvement of his colleagues, and himself, perhaps, too.

The intense camp lesson that has honed the sense of observation has yielded one more thing: consideration of how a social reality is constructed, with roles played within it and their determining power. The discussion “between myself and myself”, pointing out that “you wouldn’t tell how I would’ve behaved”, is a trace of such afterthought.

Concluding remarks

As I announced in the introduction, the intention of this study was not to verify certain earlier-formulated research hypotheses. Nor did I promise to test and (re) develop any sociological theory whilst analysing the autobiographical accounts of former inmates of Nazi concentration camps. This is, obviously, not to say that my analyses have distanced themselves from any theoretical references. On the contrary, I believe that at least some of them can be directly read as practice-based research footnotes, of a peculiar type, which can be appended to various theoretical perspectives. I would say that the most relevant among them are the concept of the social creation of reality, Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, and symbolic interactionism; in brief, the interpretative currents. The other, and rather obvious, references of relevance are various approaches within biographical studies that are pursued as part of sociology and that somewhat cut cross the aforementioned divisions, although they are never completely detached from them. These labels obviously mark certain defined philosophical assumptions as to the 'nature' of social reality; however, I do not intend to refer to these assumptions, as they have not been placed at the focus of this study.

The present text has originated from cognitive inquisitiveness and the will to grasp and understand the biographical experiences and autobiographical narratives of my (and, our team's) Interviewees – former inmates of concentration camps, particularly the Mauthausen-system camps. This inquisitiveness, and curiosity, has always been accompanied with the conviction that such an understanding would always remain piecemeal and incomplete, with some approximation, or initial insight, as the only feasible outcome. I have never doubted, however, the soundness of the effort – in terms of a better subjective understanding, which extends to an intersubjective meeting of minds.

In order to achieve at least this much, interpretation is necessary: to recognise and grasp the meanings comprised in the stories. This study is, clearly, a record of my own interpretation and reading of these meanings. Such an interpretation is free of any claim to build objective explanations or clarifications, although it is not completely unrestrained; it is a controlled impression, so to speak. For one thing, the attempt is to follow the voice/image/text, and the Interviewee, as closely as possible; for another, the proposed interpretation remains anchored in the intellectual tradition of biographical studies, furnished with commentaries, references, and footnotes (even though the latter may not appear as abundant as today's common practice would suggest). All in all, what has been proposed is an attempt to explain, or clarify – and mediate.

Having listened to the first and the subsequent stories of the survivors, my initial impression was of facing an enormous cacophony. Each of the autobiographical stories, particularly when centered around concentration camps, seemed to me particular, individual, and peculiar. With time, as I encountered more and more

accounts, revisited those previously recorded, compared one against the other, and grew increasingly distanced toward them (in terms of time, emotion, etc.), I began recognising the similarities, common threads and motifs, similar experiences, ways of interpretation and added meanings that prove their closeness to each other and, finally, similar narrative styles. I have clung to these similarities, for they have enabled me to hear a polyphony where before I only heard a cacophony of detached or abstract voices.

There were three voices in that choir which seemed dominant to me – and it is according to them that I have ordered the research material, allowing these voices to lead me through it. These included the voices of: (i) ‘old’ inmates; (ii) those imprisoned ‘as a punishment’ – in fact, a whole variety of ‘punishments’; and (iii) young men (and, separately, women) from Warsaw, who lived through the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. As there are three different types of biographical experience behind these voices, including camp-related experiences – and thus, the various social identities of the narrators – the voices themselves are, accordingly, different from one another.

I do not approach these three categories relating to the length of and reason for their stay in the camp – i.e. the specific historical experiences – in terms of ‘explanatory variables’ or ‘independent variables’, according to which all the remaining camp experiences of the Interviewees can be explained, together with their own interpretative strategies of the experiences. Instead, they form biographical observation points that make it possible, I believe, to clearly see the diversification of the former prisoners’ narratives and, consequently, a differentiation in their wartime and camp-time trajectories. From these same vantage points, a clearer view is possible of the dissimilarities and similarities between the pre-camp and post-camp (and pre-war and post-war) stories told by these narrators.

These categories also form labels, or callout slogans, with their own underlying further diversifications, in other words the dissident social universes in which the Interviewees’ autobiographies are embedded – and which, reversely, are unveiled by these autobiographies. In some cases, there were generational divisions: the oldest survivors we talked to were over twenty years older than the youngest, with a gulf of life experiences. Other times, class divisions (however archaic this may sound today) are at work; or, milieu-related, or regional ones. Furthermore, there are diverse language codes, communication and social competences, diverse narrative talents, various degrees of knowledge of the camp they once were imprisoned in. This latter aspect has a bearing, in turn, on the method and extent of the historicisation (or, a-historicisation) of their autobiographical narration of the camp experience; on (not) referring this narrative to a generalised history, to the fate of the other inmates, of the defined ‘others’. Those ‘others’ are different ‘others’ – depending on the story, or on the moment within a story: at times, diversifications by national, ethnic, or religious categories tend to be dominant, while at other times the criterion would be the position in the camp’s power structure and/or the *Lager* community’s hierarchy. Jews tend to be a particular ‘other’.

Another division line has to do with participation/non-participation in collective memorialisation rituals, attendance/absence in the production, fostering, and sustaining of a collective memory of Nazi concentration camps. This 'social location' of the Interviewees – their social identity – is, finally, crucial to their definition of the interview situation, their understanding of their participation in the research project, the 'evidence-giving' process and the testimonial itself.

An autobiographical story is never a simple report on the course of past events, or even one's experiences. The testimony of such events or occurrences is always, in my perspective, firstly a testimony of memory and oblivion, and a testimony of adding meanings to the events/occurrences. I have tried to recognise social differences, divisions, distances – and similarities too – not in external, reified social facts but in the autobiographical memory. Or rather, in the different autobiographical memories of the multiple narrators who evoke concrete episodes and interactions, interpreting and commenting on them, furnishing them with a variety of meanings, and combining them into coherent stories. These interpretations and meanings prove, moreover, to be individual and social at the same time.

Biographical experiences, 'as they really were', are not told to us and then afterwards 'separately' interpreted by their narrators (who are their subjects). These experiences are 'readily' interpreted and have meaning added to them, within the memory/identity – and, within the autobiographical account. These interpretations are integrated with the experience, being an inseparable part of – although this does not make them thoroughly lasting, determined once and forever, not liable to change. My investigation only catches them at a certain moment, which for some Interviewees proves to be the last moment possible. In quite a number of cases, this would be their only recorded account. In such a case, the account is not a 'last will and testimony' that invalidates or abolishes the meanings added before. Such possible previous meanings are no longer researchable: if unrecorded, they have perished irretrievably. If there are any available, however, they are worth mutually comparing, so that the meaning-adding processes may be elucidated from a somewhat different perspective, through such comparative study. This, however, would be a task for a separate study.³³⁶

I am using the term 'biographic(al) experience', but it has to be borne in mind – and I believe this is rather clear in my analyses – that there is a variety of experiences. Among this variety, only some specified ones are singled out,

336 A point of departure for a study of this kind could be a comparison between the accounts collected by the Auschwitz Museum and the interviews with the same former inmates carried out as part of the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project. Ten of our 164 Interviewees, who before their time at Mauthausen had been imprisoned at Auschwitz/Birkenau, have submitted their 'statements' to the Museum. Such a comparison might be even more interesting, given the fact that the temporal distances between the two accounts produced by those ten individuals vary from over forty years and a few months.

selected – consciously or, more often, unconsciously – by the Interviewees and, in some cases, ‘prompted’ by the interviewers. The choice thus arising is very selective: amidst the countless and infinite number of events, occurrences, actions and interactions, in real life as well as in the camp, it is, naturally, just crumbs that appear in the narrative. But this is the only thing we have: the life as it goes on, the ‘really’ experienced life, is inaccessible. The crumbs do not appear as some completely loose episodes; conversely, they are interrelated and reciprocally associated, interdependent, sometimes completely bound up in a cause-and-effect knot. Which, again, means that they are interpreted in a particular way; in a variety of ways, by the different Interviewees.

For some, their camp experience is part of the collective fate of the Polish pre-war intelligentsia, and an important, long-lasting and integral stage of this fate. In this perspective, they see themselves as ‘the hosts’, of a peculiar kind, of the camp and the memory/knowledge of it, as camp veterans, specialising in explaining this universe. For others, the camp is one of the numerous wartime trajectories, biographical ‘adventures’ – not the most important one, in some cases; a consequence of the earlier adventures; sometimes, a punishment for them, and one of the reasons behind the occurrences that followed. For others still, the *kacet* meant a sharp biographical incision, a sudden and startling blow, an attempt at biographical continuity – or, the reverse: the manifestation of such a continuity, when the camp experience is interpreted as an extreme intensification of what had to be borne in everyday life. For former female inmates, the camp experience has meant, in addition to everything else, a brutal attack on their sexuality and womanliness.

I will now sketch a few of the main tracks or clues that I have endeavoured to recognise and extract in my interpretations – some essential meanings I have on occasion found in the stories under analysis. This is not a summary or a set of final conclusions, but merely a brief retrospective of what eludes summarisation or recapitulation, and which is at the core of my study: an analysis of the autobiographical narratives of former prisoners of Nazi concentration camps – in particular, of the Mauthausen camp – who have been my Interviewees or who have talked to my KARTA team colleagues. The present analysis has sought to extract the meanings, or senses, added by the narrators to their own biographical experiences – primarily, camp-related experiences – and to propose a reading and an interpretation of them.

I desired my proposed interpretation to be in a constant dialogue with our Interviewees’ stories and with their own interpretations – and in permanent reference to them. On analysing a few selected accounts in more detail, I have attempted to save their integrality and comprehensiveness, as they have been audio- and video-recorded. Also, to show their peculiar elusiveness, haphazardness, and openness – by unveiling the processes of their (self-)construction or emergence, their generation through reciprocal interaction. Autobiography is an indefinite process, an open-ended project. The biographical method (analysis), as

I comprehend it for the purpose in question, similarly remains open-ended, incomplete, and inconclusive.³³⁷

The social sciences, or at least some ways of pursuing them, are sometimes called double or secondary hermeneutics, as they interpret what has already been interpreted by people. To take this further, these sciences are focused on examining these interpretations, recognising the meanings (or senses) people give, or add to, their surrounding (social) worlds, and the ones that shape their actions. The analysis contained in this book forms part of such a secondary hermeneutics – a hermeneutics that is, in fact, a minimalistic, non-offensive concept: these analyses are almost confined to a ‘dense description’, being focused mainly on extracting the ‘original’, ‘colloquial’ meanings the Interviewees add to their experiences, and on their ‘soft’ interpretation. The primary and the secondary interpretations stand close to each other, the latter being merely a careful reading and amplification of the former, a commentary on them.

One could say that I stopped halfway: as I have not detached my own interpretations from those of my Interviewees, I have been unable to construct a separate, sociological, scholarly narrative about analytically isolated concentration-camp experiences. Such an isolation could have enabled me to construct an objectivising description of the camp universe or, at least, of its fragments. It was not my intention to construct such a description, however. Models of this kind, historical and sociological descriptions, already exist. There is quite a number of them, in fact, some being exquisite. My study could only complement, illustrate, and footnote them (as it may anyway do). This is one reason for my having stopped halfway; but, there is another one, which I consider much more important.

I have focused on individual autobiographical accounts in their entirety, as they have been recorded, in order to travel within them many times: setting off from the narration – going through the memory – arriving at the experience, and backwards. This study is a report on the journey. What it also, implicitly, comprises is an interpretative proposal within the confines of the biographical method in sociology. An autobiographical story is not meant here to help collect subjectively tinged data on the objective social reality; in any case, this is not the focal point. Instead, the autobiographical story offers a space to explore symbolic meanings; my intention is to attempt to recognise their social context.

The study proposes an interpretative, consistently biographical, view of the concentration camp experience. The biographical story and its interpretation are the starting point, the pathway and the destination of these analyses. Thus, the analyses focus on the here and now, on experience (and experiencing), interpretation, and adding meaning/sense to the camp experience and camp trajectories within the autobiographical and narrative memory. The camp experience has not been reduced to an attempted reconstruction of what really happened, then and there, in the camp, or of the psychological aftermath of the time served there.

337 See N.K. Denzin, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

My perspective is, moreover, not competitive in relation to other, more traditional and more realistic interpretations; I would rather approach it as a complementary approach.

One may ask whether such a view is merely a methodological proposal, using an altered analytical language, or whether it perhaps gives access to new and concrete knowledge. The answer is yes to both, I believe – although it is fairly difficult to prove the latter. Let me try and make a generalisation on this point, though: the most important lesson I have learned from this research is that, in spite of the entire machinery of a totalitarian institution, the camp experience proves to be diversified, and such diversifications are constituted socially (along with other drivers). This is true also when they refer to one specific *kacet* – Mauthausen, in this particular case. In spite of the collective nature of war(time) trajectories, camp-related ones in particular, there exists no ‘single’, ‘common’ camp experience. The remark so frequently repeated, also by the survivors, that upon crossing the camp gate, the human turned into a number, a ‘nobody’ who started ‘from scratch’, and that all the inmates (at least, the Polish political prisoners) became equal, almost identical, appears to remove us from comprehending those experiences, rather than facilitating an understanding of them. The stay at the *kacet* is by no means a biographical ‘hole’, or some counter-biography. Usually, the camp experiences that are central to the narrators prove to be not completely detached from their experiences of before and after their time at the camp – or, to be more precise, from an understanding of these experiences, from giving them an autobiographical meaning.

Looming somewhere in the midst of these narratives, the *kacet* does not cease to be a human and interpersonal universe. Unfortunately so, one may add; for the lesson learned is most distressing.

The autobiographical space is open and limitless. This also means that it is open for subsequent journeys by the travellers to come, who will set off in search for other, new meanings; and, open to returns and revisions of the meanings once recognised and interpreted. As for myself, I am already contemplating revisiting the related aspects. And I would like others to likewise make the voyage to these camp autobiographies – or rather, voyages across and inside them. I am curious about their readings and interpretations. A story told and a story heard are two different stories. The interpreting process has no limit, and no end.

The last survivors from the Nazi concentration camps will not stay long among us; many of those to whom we talked have already perished. The records of their stories have remained (and are available): audio and video recordings, transcripts. These are sounds/images/texts of multiple and multifold use; this is how we defined them during the meetings with our Interviewees. And this is what the narrators themselves thought about them too, when they consented to undertake an effort to construct their camp-related and autobiographical stories. This is another aspect of double hermeneutics, a reverse movement: the investigated interpreting

the research process. They often found it rather an effort. And they made it consciously, with the hope that it would make sense, and that the strenuous effort of memory would not go by the board, but will be read, interpreted, and understood, perhaps, in a variety of ways, depending on the reader's knowledge and sensitivity, as long it is done in good faith.

[Zygmunt Kendziora:] Today, for instance, now that our talk is over, me, I won't sleep at night. I will involuntarily be thinking about it; it'll take a long time before I fall asleep, I'll be recollecting this conversation with you. All this will be closer to me. Today, I had it buried, the sleeping. Because the lighter reminiscences, it's often, // as we meet together with my colleagues, then we recall things, // like, the various incidents. But now, as I'm talking with you, I won't sleep tonight, that's out of the question.

[MZ:] I am so sorry for that.

[ZK:] This is normal. And, on the other hand, I hope that maybe people will get to know more about Auschwitz... // about these experiences. We'll die some day, then some trace will be left of us. Somebody, like you, sir, // they will strive to learn, will somehow propagate this. This is good too.³³⁸

338 From the account of Zygmunt Kendziora, available at the KARTA Centre and History Meeting House's Oral History Archive, ref. no. MSDP_101 (recorded by Michał Zarzycki).

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