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Narrative and Annihilation: On Calel Perechodnik's „Testimony”.

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"Where are you, men of the future?"
Bohdan Wojdowski¹

I. Annihilation and interpretation

Interpretative reticence toward the writing from the period of Holocaust can be variously interpreted: in most cases, it is the inexpressibility of suffering that seals off the access to the text even for those readers and scholars who would like to approach it with utmost sensitivity and respect. This is because a text depicting the events of Holocaust is subjected to two types of procedures: firstly, marked with the sanction of holiness, it becomes a cultural element of the Jewish martyrologium, a relic of Shoah or Annihilation² – and viewed from this perspective, both for the lay consciousness and for the one

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- 1 B. Wojdowski. *Chleb rzucony umarłym*. [Bread Thrown at the Dead] Warszawa 1990. 1960.
- 2 In the following essay I will interchangeably use the words Holocaust and Shoah but also *Annihilation* [Wyniszczenie], an extremely valuable term, proposed by M. Głowiński, revealing the ruthless irrationality and exceptionlessness of the Shoah. See: M. Głowiński. "Zapisywanie Zagłady. Z Michałem Głowińskim rozmawia Anka Grupińska." [Writing the Shoah. Anka Grupińska talks to Michał Głowiński] *Tygodnik Powszechny*. 2001 Vol. 1. 15.

that partakes in the realm of sacral imagery, it transforms into something “untouchable,” something that “cannot be opened” also as a work of language and culture deeply rooted in the tradition it originated in.

The second “defense” mechanism isolating the writing from the days of Shoah relies on treating them simply as a “testimony” that is supposed to express the “truth” of the times of inhuman bestiality. This is, too, how Cael Perechodnik, discussed in the following essay, describes his mission: to give testimony to the truth in a text serving as a confession by a Jewish policeman, a character ambiguous at the core.³ By its very nature, text-as-testimony implies its non-literariness, almost warning against deriving from it any kind of intellectual or aesthetic knowledge, not to mention, pleasure.⁴ What seems to follow from similar reasoning is that text-as-testimony is intentionally calculated to be received as confirmation, as a “yes” from the reader who, either with respect, or terror, will refrain from an “analytical,” rational review of the “testimony” ... and not the heritage of the tradition that the testimony reveals.

Those two strategies of defending Holocaust writing from the “aggression” of interpretation, stained by its very nature by the blasphemy of inquisitiveness, often become intertwined. Annihilation turns out to be inexpressible: “What happened, goes beyond the limits of human imagination, goes beyond the limits of language.”⁵ But language is not something para-human. It is precisely ultimately human, profound and rooted in the entirety of the often centuries long tradition of a people, kin, family, it is a voice extracting that which is “substantial” although sometimes “inexpressible.” The choice of language – a moment before death, as in the letters thrown from the trains

3 C. Perechodnik. *Spowiedź. Dzieje rodziny żydowskiej podczas okupacji hitlerowskiej w Polsce*. With an introduction and commentary by D. Engel (ed.), based on the manuscript. Warszawa 2004. 94: “But this would only be a justification and I decided to write my diary not for the sake of justification but for the sake of bare truth.” All subsequent quotations are based on this edition and followed with a page number. [Translator’s note: Perechodnik’s diary was published in English by Westview Press in 1996 as *Am I a Murderer? Testament of a Jewish Ghetto Policeman*. Transl. Frank Fox. As the following essay frequently cites sentence fragments and short phrases for the sake of linguistic analysis, several quoted passages were adjusted or translated again to include relevant features of the utterance. Whenever Fox’s translation is used, quotes are marked with page numbers in square brackets (AW)]

4 M. Janion. “Coraz więcej milczenia.” [More and more silence] *Rzeczpospolita. Plus-Minus*. Vol. 49. Dec. 8-9, 2001. D2. “Would, then, Hanna Krall’s prose represent what Adorno warned against in the context of Schönberg’s *Survivor from Warsaw*: do not ask us to derive aesthetic pleasure from the so called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of the murdered, do not endow their deaths with a possible sense? I don’t want to pose the question this way.” Neither do I.

5 M. Głowiński. “Zapisywanie Zagłady...” 15.

going to concentration camps⁶ – is perhaps illusory but it is a final one: that of relationship and tradition.

Calel Perechodnik (1916-1944) wrote his “diary-testimony” almost at the scene: secluded in a hidaway that offered a short but ultimately insufficient asylum, almost on the anniversary of the liquidation of the Otwock Ghetto (17-19 August 1943), he wrote down the account of how as a Jewish policeman, after he had joined the infamous organization in the service of the Germans in order to save his beloved wife and daughter, he had to personally escort them to the cattle car of that took the two-year old Aluška and his darling wife Anka on a death journey to Treblinka. A first reading of Perechodnik’s text is always paralyzing: the readers sense the hypnotic, overwhelming force of “dark captivation” that forces them to consider Perechodnik’s diary to be one of the most profound testimonies to Annihilation.⁷

A second reading, however, and this should not cause indignation, reveals ethical ambiguity of both the author and the work. Perechodnik remains silent about his membership in the Ghetto Police, and the organization as a whole, about his participation in the extermination of his neighbors, he covers up the fact that “thanks to” the swindled money he managed to live “comfortably” in the ghetto for over a year and that power seemed to give him an odd kind of satisfaction. Having “recognized” the ambiguity of the author’s attitude, a moralist, a reader searching for a binary, distinctive knowledge about the world, for a “truth” recognized through the “blueprint” of Good and Evil, rejects the writer and the work. And such rejection may come from both Jewish and Polish readers. But here, a different kind of “truth” is at stake. It is the “Truth” that shows how it became possible that a young, vivacious, educated person, a Polish Jew, was put in a situation devoid of good choice – and eventually, devoid of choice at all. It is a perspective encompassing his drama and his “betrayal” (of the Jewish people, of his family, and, simply, of man) but also attempting to discern Perechodnik’s attempts to escape the betrayal through the labyrinth of text, via text. This is why a third reading, and more, become necessary, readings no longer revealing moralist truths but complexity of the world, language and tradition in the *Testimony*.

The following essay presents an approach to Perechodnik’s witness based on assumptions that call into question the previous readings of the diary, echoing the view formulated, so far, most emphatically – although perhaps

6 J. Leociak. *Tekst wobec Zagłady. (O relacjach z getta warszawskiego.)* [Text and Shoah. On reports from the Warsaw Ghetto] Wrocław 1997. 145-149.

7 The title originally given by the editor to Perechodnik’s text (*Czy jestem mordercą?* Warszawa 1993, 1995) [Am I a Murderer? – retained in the English edition (AW)] was equally intriguing and doubtful. Admittedly, it focuses on the narrator. But also on the “murder.”

too hastily – by Agnieszka Holland: “[Perechodnik’s] perspective is as new as Borowski’s once was. Except there is no literature. There is a cruel and poignant analysis of trespasses and wrongs.”⁸ A similar view was expressed by another author, commenting that, in Perechodnik’s diary, being and speaking are: “Not an aesthetic utterance. Not a metaphor. The despair of man who helped the oppressors is real.”⁹ Jacek Leociak, in his creative insight into the poetics of the text, concludes: “The author truly seeks to reveal the whole truth about himself and the world.”¹⁰

On the one hand, there emerge classifications of the text as a “testimony,” as bare “truth,” and on the other, there comes into view an opposing corpus of disqualifying descriptive terms such as aesthetics, metaphor, literature, with an underlying suggestion that Perechodnik’s text cannot constitute the latter, that is literature, metaphor, fantasy, and fiction in particular. Reflecting this binary, evaluative system, the distinction between text-as-chronicle and text-as-work of imagination¹¹ appears to be a gross simplification when applied to Perechodnik’s writing. In the following essay, binary relations between the sanctity of a Holocaust text and the blasphemous interpretative gesture, between testimony to truth and creation or fictionality; finally, between the truth of confession and falseness of literature, will be crossed via references to the notion of “tradition.” Analysis of Perechodnik’s language and imagery, an interpretation of “topoi of erudition,” both Classical and Romantic, but first and foremost, of the narrative method will be performed basing on a belief that an analysis of this kind does not undermine the “truth” of the testimony but allows to capture it on a higher, more complex level. A recognition of figures, symbols and references to Polish and other cultures, those “signs of tradition” – tradition in deepest straits and yet continuously recalled in Holocaust writing – is not meant to contrast, although this would be the easiest solution, the “inexpressible” Annihilation with outdated tropes of culture (Polish and Jewish, lay and biblical, socialist and messianist) but, on an entirely different level, to enable a look that encompasses the entire horizon and gravity of loss and destruction of culture through the Annihilation of Man.

8 A. Holland in “Zobaczone, przeczytane.” [Seen and read] *Zeszyty Literackie* 1994 Vol. 46. 130.

9 I. Sariusz-Skąpska. “Wybrani, naznaczeni, przeklęci” [Chosen, marked, cursed] *Znak* 1994 Vol. 469 (6). 79.

10 J. Leociak. *Tekst wobec...* 144.

11 K. Sokołowska. “Kronika i wyobraźnia, czyli dwa bieguny literackich narracji o dzieciach Holocaustu.” [Chronicle and imagination: two poles of literary narratives on children of Holocaust] *Literatura wobec wartości*. [Literature and values] *Materiały z VI sesji z cyklu “Świat jeden, ale nie jednolity.”* Ed. L. Wiśniewska. Bydgoszcz, 2003. 95-102.

Perechodnik “speaks the unspeakable” but his utterance is made complete also by the incredible, furious dance of his language around the subject the challenge of which he, surprisingly, actually did manage to meet. In the following essay, I am going to present, first and foremost, the sphere that – with the help a Greek prefix and my own, vestigial linguistic imagination – will be labeled as the domain of “*dys-logos*,” meaning disintegration of the vision of the world created by Enlightenment, Romanticism and scientific Modernism.¹² But it is not true that in the Annihilation texts one finds only *dys*-world (chaos), *dys*-logos and *dys*-truth, and – eventually – *dys*-image, anti-portrayal of the world and man. To even reach and express this register, this completeness of negativity, one needs language, one needs tradition (*pro*-logos). In Perechodnik, describing “eradication of values, entrapment and inability to defend oneself against destruction,”¹³ the road to negative completeness [although even here does not become a nihilist] leads through the wholeness of tradition. Its word is summoned by the court of time, before the face of the Annihilation, this is how the *pro*-logos of tradition allows to utter the message that says: understand how much is dying with us!

Both his sentence structure and word order, as well as the passages from *Dziady* [Forfathers’ Eve] quoted by Perechodnik, become a form of loss of perhaps, the highest order, a method of its articulation that cannot be dismissed by a gesture of respect toward “testimony” nor by rejection resulting from the ambiguous role, from unclear positioning of the author among the victims. When Perechodnik joins the ghetto police, he is accompanied, in the circumstances that we have no right to judge or forgive, at least to some extent, by that part of tradition, Polish cultural heritage which will be revealed by him on the pages of the “diary.”

It is a location easy to direct accusations at but also a location where one can see much more from. One can also see, through the way the narrative is developed, through the gaps in the story and its silences, how much Perechodnik would like to get out of this situation. And with him the contents of traditions that the author carries within, eternally joined together: the Jewish and the Polish one. Traditions that are inseparable in the consciousness, although separated in their fate as Perechodnik-the-Jew is the “sentenced one,” one “worse than a Pole,” one subject to *final Annihilation*.

12 I have no desire to bring new words to life. But the Greek “*dys-*” (bad, hard), or the Latin “*dis-*” describing the disintegration into parts or elements, when placed before the certainties that encompass various dimensions of human life (history, existence, art, culture) manage to fully reflect the totality of destructive negation that the Jewish world was subject to through the barbarity of *Endlösung*.

13 J. Leociak. *Tekst wobec...* 29.

Sentence by sentence, in an intricate and not merely spontaneous manner, *Testament* reveals how Perechodnik's "old" perceptions of the world, understandably, crumble. One may not like what is to be said but the first among the spheres that were conquered, taken over and expressed by the "dys-logos" of Annihilation was the world of enlightened ideals and rationalism. The Enlightenment was the first to "fall."

II. Oppression – expression – organization of the text

The situation of writing, Perechodnik – and we must remember about that with every page of his text – wrote in very specific circumstances. He found a temporary shelter, but one surrounded by a pressing, hostile reality, where anyone could have brought him death: be it a German, or a *szmalcownik*. Hiding in a Polish flat, Perechodnik senses the pressure of externality that will sooner or later tear through the walls of his asylum, and this shows in his writing. Sentences are sometimes long, and sometimes short, as if internally pressurized, condensed, and disciplined, and at the same time always deliberate and grammatical. The pressure of shrinking time remarkably harmonizes, coexists (...to the advantage of the text) with two other types of tension, this time of internal nature: that of memory and of mental powers. In Perechodnik, memory pressures constantly – his text becomes a revelation of its content, a justification, a confession and a testament, but never – and this needs to be emphasized – even when he describes the most horrific details of the liquidation of the Otwock Ghetto, even when he writes about the death of his family, never does he succumb to recording chaotically, to a logorrheic externalization of images and the content of memory.¹⁴

This is a result of two opposite factors: strong and rational organization of imagination contents on the one hand, and unstoppable element of emotion on the other. Throughout his entire work, Perechodnik's storytelling is extremely distinctive, almost "monotypic": the content of monstrous images of memory continues to be ordered by a temporal structure. With the opening moment ("May the 7th, 1943, page 8), there begins a grand retrospect of rationally ordered character. Perechodnik is aware that a narrative of Shoah would lose much without an auto-presentation, which is why he prefaces the

14 Perechodnik's text has a deliberate composition: it includes a motto, three chapters and an epilogue. One can hardly speak of an accidental arrangement of content here. Nonetheless, the first [Polish] edition of the text, entitled *Spowiedź* [Confession] introduced modernized spelling and other changes questionable to a literary scholar. See. D. Engel, footnote 241 on page 303. "Regional and dialectal expressions were *standardized*. Punctuation was *introduced* where it allowed for a better understanding of the author's utterance. Apart from those changes, presented text is a faithful transcript of Celel Perechodnik's words." [emphasis]. Ł.

account of wartime events with a deliberate portrait of the author. Only later does he set in motion the “avalanche” or the “lava of memory.” Still, writing from the perspective of a yearlong distance, Perechodnik is in a position where he can first select the content, later – portray it and eventually – which he always does – comment on it. External tension builds up, intensifies the narration without pushing it into a state of hysterical quivering.¹⁵

The pressure of memory sets in motion a sequence of images (ones already governed by *ratio*) but it is always accompanied, first spontaneously, later in a continuous and ordered manner, by the internal pressure of reason, imagination and emotions, that disrupt the linear, horizontal narration and later, through sentences filled with fury, resignation or sarcasm, elevate individual experience to the universal Jewish and human level. Instead of a stream of images, we are presented with a succession of seemingly allegorical image sequences, universalized by the thought encapsulated by a coda or a quasi-gnome.

Perechodnik’s narrative structure, being, naturally, conducted in first-person (and, as Leociak notes, seemingly “internal”¹⁶) is characterized by a great repetitiveness of those sequences. Further, he is able to present newer memories while problematizing the earlier ones: each time proceeding from a question that opens the relevant “drawer of memory”: “What was the attitude of Poles to the Jews around that time?” (19) “What were the opinions of individual people?” (37); oft, the opening question transforms into an ironic coda: “And what is a man to do who does not believe in God?” (219) Perechodnik’s narrative reveals a significant writerly self-awareness of the storyteller. The latter, astonishingly, despite the seemingly disruptive chaotic pressures (the external one, that of memory and reason/imagination/emotion) continues to keep hold of the narrative arranging itself on a micro-scale into a reflective-visual sequence: the issue (topic) images reflection.

Naturally, this manner of storytelling does not function with mathematical precision. It does, however, have an important consequence: it allows to raise Perechodnik’s perspective to the level of universal experience.¹⁷ Or,

15 Compare the case of Baruch Milch: From July 10, 1943 to March 24, 1944 he was hiding on a Polish farm, in a Polish-Ukrainian village near the town of Tłuste (Zaleszczyki county) near the Dnieper ... Time was the only thing he had in surplus and Baruch Milch used it to the full: in nine months he filled – in Polish – over 60 school notebooks, 1613 pages.” (A. Żbikowski. *Posłowie* [Afterword] in B. Milch. *Testament* [published in English as *Can Heaven be Void*] Warszawa 2001. 281]

16 J. Leociak. *Tekst wobec...* 28.29.

17 It is one of the most interesting features of Perechodnik’s story; already on the first page of his memory-tale, the author places his personal fate, his narrative, within the scope of the entire

let us perhaps phrase it differently: what the author sees and remembers is expressed in his diary as an image of the entirety of the “tragic” Jewish fate. Meanwhile, Perechodnik himself – because of his role as a policeman serving the German – “withdraws” to the position of someone “confessing sins,” a repentant witness and accomplice. Paradoxically, this does not lessen the forcefulness of his text, but increases it! This is why his narrative *in toto* continues to meander between the poetics of *confessiones*, a confession of sins, an accusatory speech (rhetoric!), sometimes a memory or a visionary poem, even an epicedium.¹⁸

However, in its entirety, the narration of *Testament* is encompassed by the frame of authorial decision to write and to stop writing, the latter unexpectedly challenged: “August 18, 1943. Today I conclude my diaries! Tomorrow, I will read them to you, dearest Aneczka, and from the 19th of August my hand will touch them no more.” (246) *Quasi*-rational command of the narrative matter is of limited extent in the case of Jewish accounts. Sometimes, the Jewish author who records the tragedy, weakened by hunger and exhausted by disease, cannot continue for biological reasons.¹⁹ Sometimes, the account is broken off by emotional exhaustion of the victim: after all, to write means to add, to make permanent one monstrosity after another. To survive this state emotionally is impossible.²⁰ But even more frequently, the will to give heroic testimony prevails. Perechodnik’s narrative, genealogically hybrid, combining several generic features, including – for instance – conversations of the dead and with the dead – remains an expression of a remarkable command over chaos of memory, over the impulse to speak and the element of emotion.

Thus, in our view, Perechodnik’s story has four places of origin, referencing, renewing, recalling the most important elements of his speech act, of the “constructive word” (*pro-logos*) necessary to talk about all-comprehensive destruction (*dys-logos*). Those include: an initial auto-presentation

Jewish history, indeed, entire civilization, but he does it as if *à rebours*, emphasizing that he is going to write only about himself and his family. “I am not writing a history of the Polish Jews, as I have not have sufficient information to do so ... It is a story of a Jew and his Jewish family.” 8.

18 I am alluding here to the inspiration behind A. Lubaszewska’s “Śmierć w tekście – przeciw śmierci tekstu” [Death in text: against the death of text] *Ruch Literacki* 1996 Vol. 5. 577-590.

19 Although nervous exhaustion seemed to be more common. J. Poznański *Dziennik z łódzkiego getta*. [A diary from the Łódź Ghetto] Warszawa 2002. 228. [written on October the 10th, 1944] “It is difficult to go on, even though we have enough food, enough for the next several months. But we have exhausted our minds! It is hard to describe their state. There is nothing to write down.”

20 B. Milch *Testament*... 283. From the *Afterword* by A. Żbikowski: “Gradually, Milch’s argument loses clarity. His notes become illegible, his thoughts confused.”

containing the image of both the real recipient of the narrative (the reader) and the ideal one (Wife and Daughter)²¹; secondly, a lyrical-catastrophic poem-psalm on the death of his Wife and Daughter that reaches not as much into future as into the metaphysical sphere of “imagined narrative,” the vertical sphere of apposition styled as a poem-psalm-prayer-lyrical memory-dirge.²²

The third place of origin, which is not paradoxical at all, is the lyrical code entitled “Epilogue”: “Today, August 19, is the day of my wife’s Golgotha. Tomorrow is the anniversary of Her death” (191). Here, the text transforms into an intimate conversation with the Deceased whom Perechodnik tells, having lost his child, about the “other” child, one also non-living. About the diary. The process of writing transforms his words into a horrific figure of begetting, of immortalizing death, a terrible act of substitution taken up in a moment when it is no longer possible to really beget life.

Once I wanted to have a child so that I would be remembered after death. Now, when I am completely alone, I cannot leave a creation that lives on after me; I had to beget a dead fetus into which I would breathe life. Those diaries are that fetus and I believe they will be printed one day so that the whole world will know of Your suffering. I wrote them for Your glory in order to make you immortal, so they will be Your eternal monument. Now, when our daughter no longer lives, this second baby must be nursed and protected until such time when no power can destroy it. (191-192)

A diary-fetus that will come to life when printed? But Perechodnik says that he had already breathed life into it... – as God or as a man? – Because his diary is a strange construct: one both living and dead, one commemorating death to give the memory of the deceased a life not immortal but earthly, as little and as much as that. Its author is “desperate for life,” which in itself is ambiguous. He wants to live even when he takes his beloved to the cattle cars; he wants to live after Anna and Alusia have already died in Treblinka. He prolongs and justifies this life by writing, and thus – as he himself suggests – “begets,” expels from himself that constructive word which reaches into the

21 C. Perechodnik *Spowiedź*... 8. In the initial part of the text, prevails the collective, future recipient although it is clear from the onset (stressed by the author himself) that he writes because of the “internal” addressee of his account – the murdered wife and daughter.

22 The entire passage can be described as an incredible vision-apposition, monstrous but full of pathos, culminating almost as a prayer, although “Amen” concludes here a promise of “bloody revenge.”

horizontal distance of earthly future, human culture, although it is fully laden and overloaded with the tale of Great Annihilation.²³

There is also the fourth place of origin: the cruel or, perhaps, wise fate caused Perechodnik to interrupt his silence and tell the story of the murder of his father, and to direct also at the father, as he did at his Wife and Daughter, words of reconciliation and justification. Perechodnik's parents are of crucial importance in the author's drama. The writer accuses them of emotional emptiness emanating from his family house: "I emphasize: 'material' [sacrifices of my parents], because there were no spiritual bonds that tied me or my siblings to our parents" (xxii). It is Anna Nusfeld, importantly – an orphan ("She was an orphan. Her parents died when she was still a child" (12).) – and, later, his daughter, Alusia, that become his emotional and spiritual "absolute."

Writing a diary in such circumstances, at least according to the author, is not an act of taking advantage of the situation but an act of therapy; the horrifying experience of the Otwock Ghetto liquidation is described as giving birth to a new man, liberated from emotional coldness and attachment to money ("I liked money" 109). Perechodnik claims to have inherited those flaws from the affluent but emotionally hollowed world of his parents. Sensing a certain "impassiveness" of the author when he describes the metamorphosis after the culmination of the tragic events, let us point to its signals: a) "After the *Aktion*, suffering shaped me and created a new man" (109) 2) "All in all, I assumed it to be God's rightful punishment for my greed and from that day a complete change of character has taken place in me." (110) The heritage of the cold house is ambiguous: it gave birth to a young man who craves for feeling and at the same time cannot stand his father, but who in the situation of Annihilation wants to "live" at all costs, who wants to exist even for the price of service in the *Ghetto-Polizei*.²⁴ This Perechodnik is viewed with terror by the morality of the time of peace. But what is a sin (or, perhaps: a weakness, drive to self-preservation) and what cannot be overlooked in an interpretation of the text, becomes also one of its sources: it is the "flaw of the desire to live," even if only through the "second child, the diary," that triggers and orders the

23 The erotic metaphor of writing / begetting has one more surprising and rather ambiguous consequence in Perechodnik: at the end he reveals that he was physically "unfaithful" to the deceased Anka with another woman, confessing to his wife: "And you see, Anka, I was unfaithful to you. After nine months my organism gave up and I committed betrayal." (263)

24 C. Perechodnik *Czy ja jestem mordercą?* Ed. P. Szapiro. Warszawa 1995 [the latest edition does not include a photocopy of the "Instruction"] 100-101. A passage from the instructions for the Ghetto Police Otwock from November the 1st, 1940: "Service in the Ghetto Police is an *honorable* one. Those who enter it must *sacrifice* themselves and everything necessary to fulfill the tasks of the service." [emphasis J. Ł.] Naturally, this was far from reality, ghetto police was incredibly corrupt and this must have applied also to Perechodnik.

narrative. This is why the posthumous reconciliation with his father in the work's finale²⁵ is also a reconciliation with oneself and the true, most profound coda of the "work." A despotic father who, too, wanted to live at all costs is also an image of his son for whom writing becomes the clearest manifestation of the will to persist.

The narrative of the entire text focuses and erupts in four areas of origin, ironic-lyrical effusions of Perechodnik's mind or spirit. On the level of story about the past, the narrative is also stimulated by threefold pressure and, as a result, the text becomes – by God, this will sound so ironic – incredibly "alive." Was a text like this self-generated? Is this manner of storytelling, this way of building sentences in Perechodnik a miracle of Holocaust-born talent, and nothing more? No. It is a heritage of an extraordinary culture, literary culture, to be precise, of this Polish Jew, educated in France (who wrote his thesis on hemp farming)²⁶ but with a deeply internalized (deeper than by most Poles) literary culture. It was not France as a phantasm of ideals of Enlightenment, but Poland and its Romantic heritage, alongside the Jewish, Old-Testament tradition and the 20th century cultural and scientific achievement that constituted the background, a point of reference – accusation – justification. One is amazed by the strength of influence of the pre-war education that allowed for a memory-based, technical mastery of a larger part of literary tradition; similarly, although the author declares himself to be a lay Jew, from the Judaistic tradition Perechodnik retained the art (sic!) of prayer, knowledge of holy texts. Even stronger in that education than its focus on general humanities (Holocaust works teem with allusions to Polish but also German culture²⁷) must have been the encouragement for individual participation in culture and reading, first and foremost, but also (as the diary proves) film watching. There are parts of the text that seem to have been written by an author possessing specialist knowledge of storytelling techniques. But as he writes – and Perechodnik makes no secret of it – he only relies on a well expressed "memory of narrative patterns," school erudition and his own talent. How does he tell stories? What – on the lower level of text organization – is the source of its incredible persuasive strength? A strength so great that we forget about the author's

25 C. Perechodnik *Spowiedź...* 271.

26 Perechodnik was a Zionist, which influenced the choice of profession that could be practiced in Palestine in the future. (See: *Spowiedź...* footnotes 4 and 5, page 288)

27 This concerns texts written by the Jewish intelligentsia who (a fact unknown to many) did not stop to listen to the German music in the ghetto and, in their writing, to make references to universal cultural code while remaining aware that it may be referring for instance to the text of *Faustus*.

role in the story he tells? Why does he describe that which is Unimaginable and Indescribable?

III. To speak – but how?

1. Why he writes

Assertion of inexpressibility of what he witnesses, of the event of Shoah, is the basic figure of thought for a Holocaust witness. This is followed by other claims, for instance, that in such circumstances also the language grows mute, helpless and, thus, the most appropriate form to label experiences or mark events is a thought untransformed into sign, withdrawing into a pre-cognitive state of numbness, paralysis, where the very act of looking/seeing the Shoah is a fullness of anti-knowledge that can only be expressed through a kind of “semantics of silence,”²⁸ if there is one. But even though Holocaust, by its very nature, appears to be an apophatic experience, accessible only to “negative poetics,” it is the deepest and fullest assertions of inexpressibility that become a starting point, as they were for Perechodnik, for the creation of a testimony or a diary.²⁹

Perechodnik sarcastically repeats the gesture of rejecting art and literature in the face of tragedy. A Pole expropriating a Jewish book collection whose “owner died in Treblinka” (119) becomes the object of bitter reflection: “And what does it matter that shots are fired outside? It’s just Jews being killed, it is of no importance. What is of importance in the life of a cultured man, is literature and poetry” (120). The irony, however, cannot overshadow another fact, namely, the fact that the writer devotes to those books an entire page. Perechodnik himself, and let it be emphasized, had certain aspirations, unexpressed, perhaps, before the war, if not literary then “at least” humanist. It would be highly naïve to assume that he simply sat down and wrote, without having considered his method; that he is motivated by fury or guilt, regret or unbound despair. A text is a form of life and writing a form of its intensification, a summary, the last chance, perhaps, to “truly live” for a Jew in the time of war. Perechodnik never loses control over the arrangement of his story,

28 I am referencing *Semantyka milczenia II. Zbiór studiów*. [Semantics of silence part II. A collection of essays] Ed. K. Handke. Warszawa 2002.

29 For more on “apophatism and “apharasis” go to: M. P. Markowski “Wobec niewyraźnego: teologia negatywna, dialektyka, dekonstrukcja.” [Regarding inexpressible: negative theology, dialectics, deconstruction]. On “negative poetics”: T. Kunz. “Tadeusza Różewicza poetyka negatywna.” [Negative poetics of Tadeusz Różewicz] Both in *Literatura wobec niewyraźnego*. [Literature and the inexpressible] ed. W. Bolecki and E. Kuźma. Warszawa 1998. 31-42 and 293-300.

sometimes ostentatiously ordering it too much, but this is also done with an ironic purpose, for instance when he writes down the 13 points of his own, very sarcastic, plan for a German Annihilation (31-32).

Already the third sentence of the text provides us with information maybe not as much about the literary ambitions of the author but about the role of literature in his tale. It has to be negated so that it does not invalidate the truth of the Inexpressible but, at the same time, it must be used to the utmost possible degree as a literally understood *arsenal* of language; it must be used, used against ... (the oppressor), used to... (give testimony to the fate of the beloved), used instead... (of weapons): "This is not a literary work; I have neither the ability, nor the ambition" (xxi). He has both, in fact. But he is also aware that "simply writing literature" would be a kind of vaguely understood iniquity. Hence a form that is semi-literary, a quasi-chronicle: Perechodnik only wants to "describe." Themes or – as we would call them discussing a writer – topoi of modesty manifest excessively already in the initial moment of the text: "I am Calel Perechodnik, an engineer of agronomy, a Jew of average intelligence, shall try to describe my family's history during the German occupation" (xxi). Everything about this passage is ambiguous. "I" is a pronoun that opens testaments, documents written by an often weakened hand.³⁰ Meanwhile, the "I" in Perechodnik's text will prove extremely strong and vital, shouting in fury, conversing with the dead, mourning and promising revenge.

The expression: "to describe my family's history" moves in the text from the sphere of the private to the sphere of moral duty, performed in the name of all Jews. In Perechodnik – and it is quite surprising that all his self-assertions are frequently accepted without question – there are very few statements that would not be negated somewhere else in same text. And this is not only due to the irrationality, monstrosity of the described events but also due to Perechodnik's personality. One thing remains constant: the desire to write his own fate into the fate of the Jewish nation but also to describe the fate of all Polish Jews by writing his own, if not fate then text. Perechodnik is an unusual "chronicler" whose perspective would be rejected by many Jews, and non-Jews as well. His desire to speak with the voice of "them all" (an almost Romantic gesture bringing to mind Mickiewicz's: "My name is Million, because for millions do I love and suffer agonies") seems abusive, especially when he begins to accuse: "We, Jewish men, are not worthy of being avenged! We were killed through our fault and not on a field of glory" (xxi). Already in the first

30 In its earlier edition, *Czy ja jestem mordercą?* (Warszawa 1995) the diary included *Testament Calela Perechodnika* [Last Will and Testament of Calel Perechodnik] the opening of which is almost identical to the diary's introduction-autopresentation: "I, Calel Perechodnik, son of Usher and née Sara Górska..." (*Czy ja...* 265 [209]).

two sentences of the text *Perechodnik* poignantly defines, perhaps only half-consciously, the goal of his writing: it is "It is May 7th, 1943," in other words, the time of war, the time of Shoah. Followed by: "I ... engineer..." – that is "me," *Perechodnik*, and not anyone else, the witness, and not only witness but an accomplice, too; not only "chronicler" but also "creator." Annihilation and "truth" – the latter is achieved in *Perechodnik* via personal writing, one that relies on his talent but, nonetheless, also on the means of language.

2. What he writes

The issue above encompasses two questions (1) does he write about/describe everything? (2) or does he write a text whose form, "genre" he defines? Let us begin with the latter, from the "genealogical" perspective, one closely tied to the question of faithfulness in its most fundamental sense, to the question of truthfulness. *Perechodnik* sits down to fill the paper with, as he puts it: 1) a description of "family's history"; 2) "a memoir of a Jew and his Jewish family"; 3) "To be exact this is a confession about my life a sincere and true confession"; 4) "a diary" to be treated as a "deathbed confession" (xxi). Commenting on the "difficult" issue of "the feelings of Jews at the time that the Bolsheviks entered the eastern territories," *Perechodnik* stresses again that he will "try to be completely honest and objective, writing the truth and only the truth" (2).

Let us highlight the number of theological appositions of the act of writing already on the first page of the text. They are a testimony to the striking self-awareness of the writer, to a formal reflection preceding the act of writing, revealing also – let it be noted – the possibility of narrative creation, of omitting entire "regions of memory" uncomfortable to the writer." Honesty as a category of reading and motivation for confession has not enjoyed the best reputation at least since Rousseau's *Confessions*. As a chronicle-report of a Jewish policeman, witness and an accomplice to the extermination of his neighbors, *Perechodnik's* text would not be defensible in front of any auditorium. The author remains silent (until page 41) about his police service, probably omitting the killings in the ghetto that he had witnessed before its complete liquidation (having lead a "comfortable" life at that time); he admits to lies, cowardice and "expropriation" several times and this does not add but subtracts from his credibility.³¹ But he also gives his stories such a vivid, clear

31 Everyone, both Jewish and Polish witnesses confirm the generally bad reputation of the German police: respectively, E. Ringelblum *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie w czasie II wojny światowej* [Polish-Jewish relations during WWII] Warszawa 1988. 68-68. ;T. Pankiewicz *Apteka w getcie krakowskim* [Pharmacy in the Cracow Ghetto], Kraków 1982. See p. 25: "With time, Ordnungsdienst ["Jewish police"] has made itself felt to the Ghetto inhabitants."

visual and linguistic shape that his own trespasses are of secondary importance to the reader separated from the events themselves.

The value of *Testament* reveals itself through the complicated (and, to some, outrageous) relation of “I,” Perechodnik other Jews, most profoundly in its layer utilizing the poetics of *confessiones*, confession, sometimes of soliloquy, when the author talks to himself. Here, the first sphere of imagery is governed by the ironic, rhetorical style of Perechodnik’s report-accusation (directed at everyone, Germans, Poles, Jews); the second sphere is marked by lyrical, mournful, quasi-dialogical elements that are a confession of sins committed against Anna and the Daughter, a conversation with them, a plea for support and forgiveness (which undermines the claim of Perechodnik’s absolute nihilism³²) and also a promise of revenge, since lyricism can easily transform here into sarcasm. What determines the shape of text as a whole, is the subjectivity of Perechodnik’s position, his first-person perspective (usurping the right to transform into “we, Jews”) as well as the matter of described events that have already become (which is typical of this act of writing) memoir material, since they happened a year ago, but also continue to happen, so that they can beget a journal, too. Both perspectives meet – unexpectedly for the author as he has already stopped writing – in the *Epilogue* – which is when they are elevated to the dimension of “other” reality in a testament of a man who is still alive but who is under no illusions regarding his fate.³³ When Perechodnik includes in his work the description of his father’s fate (*Epilogue*), the memoir indeed transforms for a moment into a journal, and later shifts the perspective of the gaze into the eternal, supra-historical dimension of the testimony, testamentary disposition.

But classifying the text as a hybrid form, a “memoir-journal-testament” does not describe it fully, as Perechodnik – let me emphasize again – develops his narrative very deliberately: by including in his work an introduction, transforming it into a lyrical and tragic vision, that is, a counterfactual complement, into an imagined description of the death of his Wife and Daughter; he has the ability to transform a dry report into an intimate dialogue with the beloved ones, moreover – which is crucial and unacceptable to some – as a result of his

32 In his visionary poem-mourning, the supposed nihilist repeatedly cries out: “Let me accompany you, Anka, at least in my thoughts” (64), “Anka, Anka, do it...” (64), “Anka, Anka, why don’t you do what they do?” (92), “Aluska, are you still alive or are you suffocated? Do you still have some water left, Anka? Or maybe Aluška drinks your tears now?” (66)

33 A. Lubaszewska “Śmierć...” 589: “On the other hand, spiritual work takes place in the space of texts of mourning, expressed, perhaps, most aptly by Elias Canetti, who talked about the souls of the dead living within those who remained alive, where they die, slowly and ultimately. Keeping people alive through words – is it any different from creating them with words? Creating texts to keep someone alive?”

storytelling method constantly transforming sequences of memory images into rational, furious reflections – his diary-journalist “I” inevitably transforms into “us,” that is: us – Jews, us – Jewish men, us – the nation, and this “us” is constantly confronted with “them”: them – Germans, them – Poles. Surprisingly, Perechodnik’s ambition is of generalizing nature: both reflection and imagination-wise.

This is also why Perechodnik’s text gathers within itself and skillfully combines elements of a memoir, journal, testament, confession, accusatory speech, lamentation, supplication, conversation of the dead and with the dead,³⁴ sometimes, elements of ironic pamphlet, sometimes of a prayer, psalm; it contains structural elements of a tragic and “grotesque” situation as a metaphor or irrational reality but it can also be, in some of its passages, a death convict’s speech, sometimes a Kaddish, the author includes in his description of the Indescribable even certain elements of the Christian mystery (his wife’s “golgotha” 250). But, and I have to say this, Perechodnik’s storytelling aptness also enables his auto-creation, a camouflage for deeds less honorable (toward his nation and his wife), and probably also a certain degree of manipulative shifts of emphasis, from own actions to the collective Jewish passiveness. This too, however, must be viewed as a consequence of the inhuman circumstances of the Great Annihilation, consequence of a survival strategy chosen by the victim – one we may not accept fully but one we also have no right to forgive.

3. How he writes

Precisely! There is not a single indifferent sentence in Perechodnik, not one of the kind that one so frequently encounters in Jakub Poznański: “Nothing new here, in the ghetto.”³⁵ Perechodnik says nothing about the year of stabilization in the ghetto, placing his readers *in medias res*. Let us go back to the postulate of the pressing hell of externality surrounding the asylum of *Testament’s* author. The time of hiding is a time when the hunted victim (although Perechodnik would probably have said that every Jew is a game for History) can catch a breath. And, having paused for a moment, the victim has to talk, unveil the collected “monstruary” of memory. This has an impact on sentence structure: Perechodnik’s sentences are dynamic, usually short rather than long

34 In the circumstance of Holocaust, even a “conversation” of the quick with the “dead” transforms into a ghastly metamorphosis of the 17th and 18th century “dialogues of the dead.” I am referencing here the classical work by Z. Sinko *Oświeceni wśród Pól Elizejskich. Rozmowy zmarłych. Recepcja. Twórczość oryginalna*. [The Enlightened among the Elysian Fields. Conversations of the dead. Reception. Original work] Wrocław 1976.

35 J. Poznański *Dziennik z Łódzkiego...* 35.

but never devoid of internal tension (although often compound and complex). They are also characterized by “immediate” concreteness. The author never opens the subject / problem with figures of reflection of any kind: “perhaps it is now time to write about” “actually, I believe that... I think that perhaps...” As state before, Perechodnik had problematized the tale before writing it down; this allows him to capture in the sentences the very gist, the essence of events (usually depicting nothingness and absurd rather than “essence”). Let us juxtapose descriptions of people, by Perechodnik and Poznański, respectively:

I. [Perechodnik] Just the same, for the sake of justice, I *must* exclude from the ranks of the police the commandant of the Otwock Komisariat, Marchlewicz. I *cannot accuse* him of living off the ghetto during the war. He probably never crossed the boundary, not before the Aktion and not afterward. I *am absolutely certain* that in his home you will not find any Jewish possessions. (31)

II. [Poznański] *When one thinks about* the activities of Mr B. [Biebow] from the Gettoverwaltung, *one sometimes gets the impression* that his attitude toward the Jews is not hostile, but *quite on the contrary*, rather friendly. *For instance*, his sending in once such a great amount of potatoes, his giving out coupons in some of the departments, etc.³⁶

One immediately recognizes Perechodnik’s style: the tone of categorical judgment in the quoted passage, used as an introduction to later accuse the Polish policeman of indifference. Meanwhile, Poznański is filled with doubt, incertitude. Importantly, in Perechodnik, the language – consciously or not – becomes an extension of power: it retains, as power does, its decisive force and absolute strictness. Consequently, it is characterized by a kind of “descriptive non-inquisitiveness”: Perechodnik does not devote attention the marginal matters, describing individual objects and people from a distance, not aspiring to eternize photographically looks, faces, details. Those could be important outside the context of Shoah, Perechodnik seems to silently imply, but not at the time when the human being is brought to the level of an object, thing. His sentences do not circle around the subject, his phrases are not overgrown with adjectives, he also avoids the convention of the heroic-lofty prose and linguistic frantiness typical of Romanticism. Such lack of overt stylization may be perceived, by a naïve reader, as a “lack of literariness” of the testimony-text. Meanwhile, his language is Perechodnik’s strongest asset. His language

36 Ibid. 61. This is how Poznański concludes his analysis of the described character: “It is a hard nut to crack.”

and will to survive at all costs seem to become one. This is why his Polish yields to the expression of madness, motion, change, convulsion, quivering but it never yields to chaos. They – Perechodnik and his language – are the only image of order in the world dominated by disintegration and bestiality, an image both terrifying and extraordinary, or “beautiful.”

It is a language characterized by fluidity of styles: descriptive passages or reports freely transform into irony, grandiloquence, sometimes colloquialness. There are many conversational expressions in Perechodnik’s style but this never makes the text as a whole seem colloquial, written in a local dialect. On the contrary: markers of order typical of written, even literary Polish, reappear throughout the entire work. Hence the presence of words and expressions such as: “meanwhile,” “nonetheless,” “so as to,” “in the meantime,” “in that,” “as a matter of fact,” “sadly,” “and so,” or “therefore.” Importantly, this harnessing of madness through language does not wane in the description of the most tragic “action.” The dynamism of the text comes from the type of demonstrative narrative where fluctuation of tenses plays the key role. Perechodnik narrates the events as if they have already happened but also were still happening in front of our very eyes:

1. All this we only *learned* sometime later.
2. For now, night came, a sleepless night for all the inhabitants, without exception, in the ghetto
3. Rumors *fly* from mouth to mouth, *acquiring* more and more fantastic character, people turn like ghosts in the warm, bright August night
4. Wednesday, August 19th 1942, the day of annihilation has come
5. Meanwhile, Satan *looks* on all this, surveys the living marionettes, and laughs as he has never laughed before
6. The first shots are fired; the entire ghetto *is already surrounded*...
7. The first victim is Dr Glikmanova, who *lives* near the Warsaw crossing point
8. Oh lucky woman! You *died* at the moment when you least expected it, unaware that together with you were sentenced to death your beautiful small children! (32)

Sentences above, selected from a longer report, have the incredible force of a demonstrative narration. The past becomes a living presence, as if projected onto the screen of memory but in a way that allows the narrator to retain a highly emotional relationship to it, expressed also through the constant shifts of the perspective of his gaze. He is here, among the loved ones, but also there, among the dead – those that will be dying tomorrow. He speaks to the reader but quickly turns to address the described crowds, the single victim

and the anti-addressee who plays a special role in this narrative: “the German Satan” revealing himself to be the devil of German culture, and a metaphysical spirit of evil that – if it does not exist – should be appointed to explain the metaphysical immensity of Annihilation.

It is hard to say that Perechodnik “uses” *praesens historicum* here. No, owing to perfect memory and his great, vivid imagination, he is able to encapsulate a sequence of images in verbal figures interchangeably producing “image-report” and “reflection-fury.” Being a sober engineer of agronomy, he avoids the temptation of any sort of metaphysical or symbolic multiplication of meanings, senses. No thing or fact can become a symbol of anything, because “nothing,” “Nothingness” is, turns out to be, the foundation of everything. Only he, Perechodnik – the one watching and registering all of it – can become the carrier of the sole, essentially desymbolized sense of those events: things are what they are and nothing worse than that can ever exist.

Reality is heading toward monstrous visions of art, grotesque and the living dead become real. Grotesque and reality function here in a reversed order of unity, realness and not a fictional meta-world, created in the literature made of words. Perechodnik places himself in the horrifying role of the one who whispers the meaning of death to those who, like doctor Glikmanov’s wife, died at the very beginning, unaware how “lucky” they are. And when “it” is already happening, also the inner strength, emotional “rebellion” (?) has to find its release, suddenly interrupted by a report, description of the “living death” and then erupts not as much with irony, as with sarcasm (the origin of the word is strange: *sarkasmos*, from *sarkadzein*, to tear the flesh (like dogs); to bite one’s lips in anger; to mock – and *sarkos* – flesh; body).³⁷ It is a sarcasm of the strongest, worse type, sometimes changing into something irrational, when the helpless mind of the witness, his battered soul and wrecked nerves can no longer hold off bitterness and anger. But even when Perechodnik’s text balances on the verge, it does not become a negative linguistic image of the word-ruin, wild howl.

This is why the sentences are infused to such a degree with ironic interjections: “truly,” “really,” “by no means,” or the already archaic *whether*.³⁸ [PL *azali*] Moments of particular tension in the narrative are frequently interrupted by an ironic apostrophe to the victim: “Engineer Rotbilt! With all your connections, your wealth and your permits, you had the highest chance to save yourself, so why did you die, oh naïve man?” (50) Sarcasm erupts in the constant repetition of questions, frequently containing the question-figure itself

37 W. Kopaliński *Słownik wyrazów obcych i zwrotów obcojęzycznych*. Warszawa 1983. 377.

38 The issue of irony in Holocaust texts requires a separate analysis, so does the distinction between irony and sarcasm.

("I am asking"): "I am asking you, people, *whether* anything like that can even be believed? Women shot for no reason, innocent children, just like that, in broad daylight?" (28)

Moments where irony accumulates in a cascade of questions, introducing a kind of anti-sapiential, perhaps even a mockingly-frenzied tone, are frequent in the first part of Perechodnik's text. He constructs several parodies of enumerative order (decatalogue?), listing and describing, for instance, the conditions for "murdering without exception all Jews in the General Government" (31) and the passage included in *The Warsaw Ghetto Diaries*,³⁹ entitled "O co Żydzi mieli prosić Boga" [And what were the Jews to ask God for], both deserving a separate commentary. What is horrifying, is the fact that the questions or enumerations are not meant to establish contact with the victims, or with the God that Calel does not believe in, which he repeats obsessively every couple of pages. They are directed at the reader and, in a way, at Perechodnik himself, at his Jewish consciousness that became a brand-sentence of death. In Perechodnik's text, the word "Jew," repeated ironically – or so it sometimes appears, begins to sound sinister rather than tender (31–35).

He conducts his narrative both on the level of microstructures, describing the most horrific events, and in its horizontal fullness, containing and expressing his life. Perechodnik's "I," revealed in the second sentence of the text against the curtain of Annihilation days, shows itself to us wearing a penitential robe of a simpleton of no literary talents or aspirations (which also means that Perechodnik does not reject "literature" as a way to express Holocaust), skillfully conducts also the macro-narrative. And it does not rely on a simple reconstruction of events that lead Perechodnik to the shelter where he writes his story. No. He enters several different roles: that of a person temporally ordering the events, collecting and encompassing the occurrences he has not witnessed himself, a visionary of his beloveds' death. Even more frequently, he becomes the person who anticipates the events of the narrative, an all-powerful narrator – alas! not an all-knowing narrator. Perechodnik continuously confronts in his imagination what he thought, and what others did, with the terrifying truth; sometimes he lets his thoughts run into the future: "Naturally, [Kestenberga] did not leave me any orders, he was, after all, a God-fearing, red-bearded Jew not without reason and as such he deeply believed he would yet return to his homestead..." (116) So speaks the steward of this testimony, its ruler – at least within the realm of his memory and wounded consciousness.

39 *Pamiętniki z getta warszawskiego. Fragmenty i rejestry*. Ed. M. Grynberg. Warszawa 1988. 258–259. See Perechodnik's biographical note included in the volume that sums up his service in the *Ghetto-Polizei* in one sentence: For some time, Perechodnik served as a member of GP in Otwock.

All that lies beyond the walls of his asylum is something that one might call a narrative of Satan-accident, or games of human wickedness. But the pages of the story lie within Perechodnik's domain and he can operate the initial signals of temporality so that they not only order his storytelling but endow it with an epic dimension:

- 1) "It is May 7th, 1943. I am Calel Perechodnik" (8);
- 2) "I was born in Warsaw on the 8th of September, 1916" (9);
- 3) "Suffice it to say that the cursed year of 1939, the year of tempest, the year of trials, found us in Poland, in our home town, Otwock" (13);
- 4) "Summer went by, then came November and with it announcements that starting with December 1st, 1940, Jewish ghettos will be founded" (23);
- 5) "August 19th, 1940. My wife gave birth to a beautiful baby girl" (22);
- 6) "In July and August 1940 they start sending Jews to labor camps";
- 7) "Knowing that the war wasn't going to end soon, and to be safe from the round-ups, I joined the Ghetto-Polizei in February 1941" (23);
- 8) "April 1942 – a miserable Easter" (29);
- 9) "May passes quietly, June passes quietly" (30);
- 10) "July 1942. What are the Germans doing?" (31);
- 11) "July 22nd 1942. Himmler himself makes an appearance in the Warsaw Ghetto" (32);
- 12) "August 15th was a Saturday" (41) – the beginning of the Aktion; "August 16th, Sunday. Laundry day at my house." (42); "Monday, 17th of August. The general mood in Otwock worsens." (42); "18th of August – Tuesday. A beautiful, sunny day. The town is quiet and then, suddenly, commotion: some women run to us, shouting 'hide the children!' (43); "Wednesday – 19th of August 1942, doomsday has come" (49) "And they walk away into the dark night without a goodbye." "A long train whistle, you have departed, Anka, on your last journey. God have mercy on me!" (63) followed by a vision of Anka and Alusia's death;
- 13) "August 20th in the Otwock Ghetto. We are leaving the square, going home. But are we really? Does a Jew need a home?" (70)

Let us read no more – in Perechodnik, time is both a liquid mass and a fatal, monstrous structure that needs to fulfill itself. That which has already happened; how he narratively shapes the tale, is his choice. And so he allows time to thicken dramatically until the "action," to accumulate before reaching

the inexpressible “conclusion”: liquidation of the ghetto and his family; later, for a moment, he lets the “real” time of memory (but what he describes seems ir-real) transform into the supra-real time of “accompanying” the beloved ones to the place of torment. And seconds after this imaginary culmination, time opens up yet another chapter in life and in the tale – here Perechodnik again becomes truly horrifying. One has to live, one has to save oneself...

4. How he calls it

What is, then, that which lasts before the eye of memory and imagination, as only the latter can move those stony images and imbue them with force? Does the language, having unveiled Inexpressible Negativity, give up on naming it in the ghetto testimonies using terms from the realm of art, aesthetic categories, even those that have already been devalued through everyday use, such as “tragedy”? It does not. While a scholar of Annihilation, from the distance of decades, may be willing to move those events from the category of “tragedy” to the category of “absurd,”⁴⁰ but the knowledge and culture of the victims and the witnesses cause them to write down the reality the way they can. First of all, as an unprecedented “tragedy”: “What will be the name given by history to this war and our, Jewish, martyrology?”⁴¹ Poznański asks, introducing to his journal expressions such as “big tragedy,”⁴² although, aware that the tragic metaphor does not sufficiently reflect reality, he also adds “comedy” as a metaphor of events. But also the minor, everyday occurrences are described in Poznański via erudite and aesthetic references: Rumakowski’s visit is a “tragic farce, worthy of Gogol’s penmanship”⁴³ and the “revue” staging (!) in the ghetto accompanied by the following commentary: “During the ticket distribution, the office witnessed grotesque scenes.”⁴⁴ Tragedy – comedy – grotesque are merely a part of reality that begins to resemble aesthetic categories proper to literature only, having no designates outside the world of literature. The less an aesthetic element has in common with *mimesis*, the closer it is to the reality of the ghetto. When people and the world begin to resemble a horror film or a mask or puppet theater, hiding in a place masked with theatre masks becomes the height of cruelty of the imagination:

40 S. Buryła. “Holocaust a nowa sytuacja tragiczna.” [Holocaust and the New Tragic Situation] *Ruch Literacki* 1999 Vol. 6. 633-647.

41 J. Poznański *Dziennik z Łódzkiego...* 101-102.

42 *Ibid.* 179.

43 *Ibid.* 68.

44 *Ibid.* 72.

Our first hiding place was an attic. Windows overlooking Żydowska St. were covered with masks and dolls from the revues staged once in our resort. It all looked rather ghastly. Weird, painted faces looked at us from dusk till dawn. Of course, we couldn't come near, not to mention open, the windows.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, in Perechodnik's account, those meta-aesthetic categories of ghetto reality are shifted in another direction. Here, the imagination of the writer is "at work" – due to his position as "policeman," in other words, someone who will live longer than his neighbors taken to slaughter, he sees more and from a different perspective: as if from above and at the same time from within the crowd of victims. The most distinctive feature of the meta-aesthetic Holocaust descriptions in Perechodnik is his noticing not the unrealistic, but rather supra-realist dimension of the horrors for the description of which he uses the category of "puppetry" (let us bear in mind that the French *marionette* comes from *Marion, Marie* – Mary). Here are some of Perechodnik's observations on the "action": "It was a true marionette theatre, and what a tragic one, too!" (71) "People turn into automatons, silly dolls, not even living ones, as each and every one of them is killed." (52) "Oh, you cursed Germans! How clever you are, how quickly have we become obedient puppets in your hands!" (62)

On the opposite pole, in the world of the executioners, Germans – there is only the phantasmatic, ironic category of "divinity" that they (but not the Poles) are attributed with. Those Huns or Vandals (terms used frequently in Holocaust testimonies) in the imagination become a nation of gods ("Nietzsche's nation," 31), with ultimate power and cruelty ruling over the Jewish "marionettes." It is a mutation of the soldier image typical of children (also, possibly, subversion of the father archetype), adorned with symbols of power, force, both terrifying and fascinating for the infantile imagination. This soldier, even when he is mortal enemy, rouses, and paralyzes imagination. A similar image of Russians can be found in Mickiewicz⁴⁶ but also in Michał Głowiński's "Burza" [Tempest], a semantically pregnant war story.⁴⁷

In Perechodnik we have a sequence of obsessively returning phantasmatic images. Describing the very pit of hell, ghetto liquidation, he notes: "No one

45 *Ibid.* 225.

46 A. Mickiewicz *Pan Tadeusz czyli ostatni zajazd na Litwie*. In the "Epilogue": "And if at times a Muscovite made his appearance / he left behind him only the memory / of a fair and glittering uniform / for we knew the serpent only by his skin." (based on the translation by George Rapall Noyes – AW)

47 M. Głowiński "Burza" *Dekada Literacka* 2003 Vol. 4.

can think. The whistles of the Jewish policemen, the shots of the Ukrainians, the corpses of familiar people underfoot. Helmeted German officers, with silvery shields on their chests, resemble some demigods, in contrast with the destitute, humble crowd of Jews, with baggage on their shoulders, small children, and a terrible fear in their hearts" (35). Later: "Lipszer addresses us. His voice falls on us slowly, harshly. The German pronounces each word with care. Is he a man or God?" (38) Puppets and gods – this is how Perechodnik horrifyingly describes it – automatically and harmoniously perform the same work: elimination of the puppets the description of which reaches in Perechodnik the highest level of – what word should one use – tragic grotesque, fury, irony of monstrousness:

The Germans stand calmly, fan themselves with helmets; they are sweating – the days are so warm and humid. They do their own "work" automatically. Aim! Fire! Aim! Fire! What's the difference whether it's at a head of an old man, a younger one, or a small child? Aim! Fire! Aim! Fire! Each bullet brings deliverance and freedom. For Greater Germany, for *Vaterland!* Ach, are there many more of these cursed Jews? They multiply like vermin that have to be utterly exterminated to save the very ancient European culture. Every bullet allows one to bravely come into possession of Jewish gold, which will enable children to live a life of luxury. Aim! Fire! Aim! Fire! (77-78)

This is not a report anymore. It is a vision the creation of which was enabled by the alliance of memory and imagination, of language and image focused on the shared hatred and revulsion toward the tormentors. The Indescribable gets described here. For this to be possible, for the vision to capture us by the throat, the puppetry was necessary, puppetry imitated even by the language: "Aim! Fire!" Fury-word mixes with the word of automatic repetition, orders images that Perechodnik nonetheless does not want to (and has no right to) attribute with the rank of explicitation, explanation, or symbol. It is not the case of "provoked thinking that makes – despite its own 'helplessness' – the effort of piercing the 'mystery'"⁴⁸. The word takes a different goal: to write down the "absurd" that will turn into accusation and premise of revenge or vengeance. "Absurd" is a frequent word in Perechodnik's dictionary (i.e. – 45, 55).

And the last figure of the Indescribable. This time, it was a 20th century invention, the cinema, which lent the metaphor its subject. In the reports

48 C. Wodziński "W stylu prowokacji, czyli pytania Holocaustu" [In the Manner of Provocation: Questions of Holocaust] *Światłocienie zła*, Wrocław 1998. 289.

from the Warsaw Ghetto, the monstrous character of “Frankenstein” is not a doctor of Mary Shelley’s novel (*Frankenstein: or the New Prometheus*) but a gruesome, cruel, human monster, a German police officer nicknamed so due to his resemblance to the famous movie character, Ringelblum believes.⁴⁹ Perechodnik’s wife, Anna (Chana) co-owned “Oaza,” [Oasis] a cinema in Otwock. While he guards those sentenced to death on the night preceding execution, he “joined in the familiar Psalms” (74) or challenges God with words resembling those from Konrad’s monologue by Mickiewicz (“If there is a God, who is silent, let their curses reach him at last” (78)), in the moment of tension and hopelessness, Perechodnik’s imagination suggests him a cinematic metaphor. He believes he is part of an ontological illusion, pseudo-reality of a movie. It is as if grotesque, irony and masquerade of puppetry stepped down from the screen, from pages in books, from the stage and became flesh and blood of Annihilation in the most excruciating amplification.

Sometimes I fell into a semisleep, and it seemed to me that I was sitting in a movie house where some terrifying sound film was turning the blood in our veins to ice. When the cries grew loud, I woke up and looked around. On all sides, in the dark of the night, I saw the shadows of people crying, cuddling the children to their breasts. What did happen to children in that cursed night? (74)

We already know that the question, as it is typical of Perechodnik, will be followed by a report on the children and later, an eruption of questions to God. Or, rather, reproaches. Perechodnik’s entire Shoah narrative is an extraordinary mark of “modern” cinematography: with its changeable perspective, use of light and shade, evoking fear and compassion. But it is a horror we do not experience in a movie theater. Yes, we experience it emotionally while its actors really die as automatons-marionettes wound up by cruel Gods who have come to destroy the Jews till the last man, to annihilate.

*

The author died in Warsaw, in October 1944. Earlier he joined AK (the Home Army) and got released because of typhoid. Henryk Romanowski

49 E. Ringelblum *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie...* 68. See also: “O Frankensteinie” [On Frankenstein] in E. Ringelblum *Kronika getta warszawskiego. Wrzesień 1939-1943*. Transl. from yiddish by A. Rutkowski. Warszawa 1983. 385. “It’s a bloodhound, every day he kills some smugglers. He can’t have his breakfast unless he had spilled some Jewish blood before.” Ibid. 393.

reports⁵⁰: “He perished in a bunker following the surrender of the Warsaw uprising. He was together with a group of twenty-two people. They were discovered by looters who were searching on behalf of the Germans. A friend of mine, the only one from the whole group who saved himself, found the group from our bunker by chance at night, and we took him along with us. As he told it to me, all those in his bunker came out as the bandits demanded. Calek, having just been ill, could not come out and perished in the bunker and very likely burned to death; all those who came out were shot on the spot.”⁵¹ Calel’s friend, Genia, adds: “Knowing Calel’s attitude, I am convinced that in that last moment, cyanide spared him a lot of suffering.” Romanowski continues: “The following day, when I found out about this tragic event, I went to the place where it happened and buried the remains of my dear and good friend, whom I tried to save with all my strength during the uprising.” According to Genia: “He broke down at the very end, the typhoid exhausted him completely. He didn’t speak, but screamed that He had to die but he would not let me die because of him...”

Translation: Anna Warso

50 Even when reconstructing the story of Perechodnik’s death from quotations and accounts, they create an image of death against death itself, a narrative against emptiness and erasure. (See: A. Lubaszewska *Śmierć w tekście...*).

51 Based on “Fragmenty listu Geni do Pejsacha Perechodnik” [Genia’s letter to Pejsach Perechodnik] and Henryk Romanowski’s “List do Pejsacha Perechodnika” [Letter to Pesach Perechodnik] included in *Czy ja jestem...* 268-271.