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Ghetto Trajectories: Writing about Personal Experiences in the Warsaw Ghetto Journals (Abraham Lewin, Rachela Auerbach, Janusz Korczak).

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Ghetto Trajectories: Writing about Personal Experiences in the Warsaw Ghetto Journals (Abraham Lewin, Rachela Auerbach, Janusz Korczak)

Capturing experiences recorded in journals written in the Warsaw ghetto presents many difficulties. Sudden incomprehensible extirpation, total unpredictability of the future, constant threat of death, consequently the loss of control over one's life situation, and the collapse of the biographic scheme of actions become part of the experience of all inhabitants of the closed district. They all share with each other this common experience but at the same time each of them goes on with his or her own unique life story. Both specificity of an individual fate and regularities of the ghetto experience could be interpreted by the notion of "trajectory." The concept of the "dying trajectory" elaborated by A. L. Strauss served to describe medical work, its organization and its influence on dying people and their families (*Time for Dying*, 1968). The study of patients' suffering and chaos emerging in the course of performing medical work made it possible to capture the phenomenon of trajectory as, in general terms, established by G. Riemann and F. Schütze. The general concept of trajectory is a tool of reconstructing and understanding phenomena which "are structured by the chain of interconnected events which are unavoidable without bearing high costs, repetitive breakdowns, expectations and the increasing feeling of control loss over one's life situation. It feels as if being 'pushed' and only able to react to 'external forces' which are hard to understand."¹

The trajectory understood this way is an instrument used to analyze suffering and disorderly social processes. For obvious reasons, the experience of being thrown into the ghetto reality gains the trajectory potential. This "collective trajectory" consists of

¹ G. Riemann, F. Schütze, Trajectory as a Basic Theoretical Concept for Analysing Suffering and Disorderly Social Processes.

individual “biographic trajectories.” Suffering always takes place within an individual biography – this is why the latter can be the only measure of the trajectory. G. Riemann and F. Schutze point to the biographic influence of the trajectory of suffering which lies in transformations of the individual’s identity. All of the changes within the individual “I” are “internal events” (as the authors call them), which are not a subject of external observation. This is why the only, although indirect, possibility to look into those changes is reading autobiographic forms – in this particular case, journals and diaries written in the Warsaw ghetto. These literary forms as space for direct manifestation of subjectivity become a place where the trajectories’ dynamics can be captured.

Three examples of journals conducted in the Warsaw ghetto illustrate the trajectory experience, show the construction of a new definition of a life situation and the attempt to gain control over the trajectories’ dynamics.

Accelerating Trajectory: Abraham Lewin

Abraham Lewin, a well-known pedagogue and historian, author of the book *The Cantonists*, cooperated with the ghetto underground Ringelblum Archive. Lewin is an author of a journal found – similarly to Rachela Auerbach’s notes – among the materials hidden in the archive.² The discovered part spans a period between June 1942 and January 1943. The last note was made on 16 January 1943, most probably a few days before the author’s death during the January deportation (between 18 and 20 January 1943). Although the period covered by the journal is relatively short, the notes overlap with a few main stages of the gene life: “normality” before July 1942, the July action, life in factories, the January action. The author notes his observations down with great frequency, but not every day.

The most characteristic feature of Lewin’s journal is its unusual factographic abundance. The author fills every note (all of them annotated with dates) with a lot of information related with events happening in the ghetto and outside of it. Some of them are eye-witnessed by the author himself, but the majority of them are rumours and gossips heard and noted down by Lewin. Each event is located in space and time with scrutiny. The author particularly emphasizes facts seen or heard “from the reliable source”:

Last Wednesday, i.e. on May 6, almost all Jews from Dęblin and Ryki were taken away. Only around 50 strong, healthy and robust Jews (together with their families) – as I was informed – were left in Dęblin because they were suitable for hard labour. The rest were taken away in an unknown direction. (1956 no 19-20, 174)

Engineer Sz., a serious man, told me about the last week murder Germans committed on a young girl in the house in Pawia Ila Street. (1956 no 19-20, 188)

² The entire ghetto journal of Abraham Lewin (written in Jewish and Hebrew) was published in English: A. Lewin, *A Cup of Tears. A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. A. Polonsky, transl. C. Hutton, Fontana/Collins 1990. The Polish version (with some omissions) was published in “Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego” (transl. A. Rutkowski), no 19-20/1956, no 21-24/1957, no 25/1958.

Last week, I was told that Jews are being evicted from Cracow. I did not believe the sad news and I did not note it down. (1956 no 19-20, 188)

The facts written down by Lewin are very homogeneous. It is a litany of acts of violence and outrage, massacres, and murders done to Jewish communities everywhere in Poland and in the Warsaw Ghetto. With this regard, Abraham Lewin's journal becomes a chronicle of the Holocaust. The great majority of his observations from before the extermination action resemble a catalogue of murders and assaults. If we wanted to create an index of all places mentioned by the author, it would include dozens of Polish towns of different sizes:

1. In Zduńska Wola, during last Purym, ten Jews were caught...
2. The same happened in Łęczyca...(Supposedly, the same thing had place in Bieżeń).
3. In Izbica (Lubelskie region) all local Jews (around 500) were sent away.

(1956 no 19-20, 170)

The flow of news from Poland is often interrupted by a murder committed right around the corner, in the neighbourhood: on Dzielna, Więzienna, Orla, Krochmalna, Waliców, Chłodna. Murders help the author measure time but danger slowly approaches not only in time (repeated phrases: lately, in those days, currently, tonight, today) but also in space.

If Abraham Lewin's journal only consisted of notes which would panoramically picture the Holocaust, it could be perceived as a journal-chronicle. At the same time, we feel that the identity of the author unceasingly permeates even through the most objectivized note. Here is a chronicler who faithfully and precisely describes events and realities simultaneously exposing his own anxiety. It is fear that becomes the basic component building up the diarist's identity, transforming the chronicle into the dramatic personal journal.³ Fear taints every page of the text – at times the author straightforwardly admits it, other times the reader is under the impression that the whole Lewin's account is lined with fear:

The abyss is getting closer to each of us, the muzzle of the apocalyptic beast whose forehead is marked with the words: death, destruction, extermination, painful agony and eternal uncertainty; endless fear is the most terrible feeling among all our experiences and suffering – so rough and tragic. If we survive till the end of this dreadful war, when – as free people and citizens – we will retrospectively ponder upon the past war years, we will ascertain with no doubt that what was most terrible, saddest and most destructive to our nervous system and health was to constantly live in the atmosphere of anxiety and fear of the naked life, incessant shifting between life and death, the state in which any second our heart was threatened to break out of anxiety and fear. (1956 no 19-20, 176)

In his analysis of fear, Antoni Kepiński demonstrates the unconditional relation between the feeling of fear and the future.⁴ We are always afraid of what will happen, what waits for us

³ The unusual character of Lewin's personal testimony in which the narrative is filled "from the inside" with "fear and trembling" was indicated by Jacek Leociak, cf. id., *Text vs Holocaust (on accounts from the Warsaw Ghetto)*, Wrocław 1997, 141-143.

⁴ A. Kepiński, *Fear*, Cracow 1995, 120.

in the future. Fear remains a signal we are unable to verify, and it is only based on a certain sense of probability. The feeling of our life being threatened is a signal of death lurking in a temporal and spatial distance. The feeling of being threatened permeates through the entire Lewin's journal. The more information the author gathers, and the denser the register of German crimes, precisely located in time and space, the more penetrating sense of the proximity an individual death. The author's feeling of constant danger determines a specific type of narrative, it affects the storytelling. Enumerating names of towns or streets in Warsaw, underlining the up-to-date nature of events (typical of this literary genre) and repetitive "I'm afraid" makes the story dynamic. This leaning towards the future and the trepidly intense expectation of what must come makes us see the structure of Abraham Lewin's text as a metaphor of a noose tightening around one's neck. Indeed, the author's sense of being imprisoned in space and time results in many stifling metaphors:

When I hear this kind of news, I choke and I feel a terrible burden pressuring my heart. Black fear strangles and crushes me...The pressure on our soul and mind became so strong and overwhelming that it's impossible to stand it. (1956 no 19-20, 176)

The noose around Warsaw increasingly tightens. (1956 no 19-20, 202)

Nothing new has happened but there is something extraordinary in this tranquillity, something suffocating. We fear our fate that the nearest future, i.e. after October 20 will bring us. (1957 no 23, 71)

When I listen to stories from Treblinka, something starts to choke and stifle my heart. Fear of "what" will happen is perhaps stronger than one's suffering in the moment of their death.

(1958 no 25, 127)

Incessant feeling of suffocation, tightening of the noose, is strengthened by the sense of more and more claustrophobic space:

Increasingly tight. Terribly, dreadfully. (1957 no 21, 136)

Well known streets – Nowolipie (from both sides of Karmelicka), Mylna and others – are completely enclosed by fences and walls, it's impossible to get in there. It feels as if these were cages. (1957 no 22, 85)

[Streets] have been enclosed by fences...Insatiable enemies' clutches are reaching for us again.

(1957 no 22, 88)

But for us, in our tight and dark little world, days are black, sad and seem very long.

(1957 no 23, 74)

People locked in prison, like animals in a cage, cannot defend themselves. A sense of being restrained is amplified by fear which results from the increased feeling of helplessness.⁵ When the noose tightens around one's neck, when crimes take place in close proximity, space shrinks and time thickens, the ontological anxiety is getting greater and more intense.⁶ The continuous threat is hard to handle, if one is not able to take a deep breath

⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁶ Cf. B. Engelking, *Czas przestał dla mnie istnieć... "Analiza doświadczenia czasu w sytuacji ostatecznej"*, Warsaw 1996, 118.

(following the noose metaphor). Every time the author finds an asylum, it is fragile and momentary. Short-time haven can be found in time, a short moment of “now”:

It’s quiet at the moment (emphasis mine), they don’t murder and send to death in Treblinka.
(1957 no 23, 75)

One could look for shelter in the thought of revenge to be performed by next generations, so in the undefined future:

Let this blood scream and demand revenge for the crimes which have never taken place before in our history and in the history of mankind. (1957 no 24, 45)

But death, although distant in time, becomes more and more certain. Searching for hope resembles leaning on quicksand:

There are moments when I am slightly more confident of my fate, I sometimes become indifferent, but suddenly I’m overwhelmed by such fear of death that I’m close to going insane. It all depends on the news from the streets. (1957 no 21, 130)

If time before the July action is a premonition of danger and the time after the action is anticipation of death, the extermination action becomes the turning point. It constitutes a breakthrough not only in the author’s biography but also in the narrative of the journal. Detailed and precise descriptions are replaced with a fragmented and interrupted text which seems to imitate the chaos of events:

Misfortune: Gucia was evicted from her flat. Five people were killed at night on Dzielna. Terrifying scenes take place in the streets. Policemen take away nicer furniture from flats people had been expelled from. Umschlagplatz: a Jew is crying. They are beating him. Why are you crying? My mother, my wife! Wife – yes, mother – no. A smuggler who jumped out of the window on the fourth floor. I saw him, he was seriously injured. Ten thousand! The Wajcblum family. Property plunder. (1957 no 21, 127)

Against the chaos of events emerges the biggest tragedy in Lewin’s life – on 12 August, during the blockage of the factory on Gęsia 30, his wife Luba is taken away. Next pages of the journal are stigmatized with his personal tragedy:

There are no words to express my tragedy. I should have gone after her – to die. But I’m not strong enough to do it...I will never find consolation, as long as I live. If she had died naturally, I would have not been so unhappy and crushed. But to fall into clutches of those barbarians?! Have they murdered her already? (1957 no 21, 137)

The limit of the expressible reached by the author is impossible to be crossed, there is no more to say. What is more important, not only despair cannot be spoken about but it is also the reason why one cannot speak about oneself. The sense of our own “I” is lost – it becomes an unknown territory. “There are no words to express my tragedy” means so much as “there are no words to express myself.” The author’s actions lose their intentionality, he can’t do what he wants: he’s not strong enough to go with his wife to death.

“Will there be new Bialik who will create a new threnody and will write a new work *In the City of Slaughter?* (no 25/1958, 127), asks Lewin but he does not really wait for “the new Bialik” but attempts to testify with his own life. The chronicler of the Holocaust places his own fear, despair and his most dramatic experiences in the centre of the text.⁷ The author himself, experiencing fear and despair, becomes a peculiar *exemplum*, an illustration of the history of his nation. Lewin often writes about fear in the first person plural because the border between the collective fate and the story of an individual is very liquid in his journal.

A lawyer from Lviv in two hours told us today...about the gehenna in Lviv and the entire Eastern Galicia... These two hours were one of the most tragic hours of my life.

(1956 no 19-20, 197)

– says Lewin, linking his own fate with the fate of the community.

The account on the external world is particularly developed in Lewin’s journal, while the collective trajectory and the individual fate of the author interlock into an inextricable knot. Chaos and helplessness of the community give rise to the individual identity constructed out of the remains of the collective fate. Lewin’s case, which illustrates in a special manner the social process of building the trajectory, also shows the individual biography shaped by the personal tragedy. The tragedy, i.e. the loss of his wife during the July action, becomes the turning point of the story. At the same time, due to the coherence between the collective trajectory and the individual biography – so strongly felt by Lewin – in consent with historical events subsequent, the author’s trajectory undergoes “acceleration.”

The tension between the story of the nation and one’s own fear and despair, completely individual and unable to communicate, permeates through Abraham Lewin’s journal, building its unique structure and giving testimony to the individual trajectory process.

Domesticated Trajectory: Rachela Auerbach

Among numerous personal accounts written in the Warsaw Ghetto, Rachela Auerbach’s journal stands out as the one to be particularly homogeneous in terms of its subjects.⁸ Death appears to be the most dominant theme: death of close people who pass away in front of the author’s eyes, and death of strangers – nameless corpses lying in the streets of the Ghetto. For ten months (between August 1941 and June 1942) she watches and keeps account of the city’s slow death. Auerbach surveys the ghetto from a peculiar point: a kitchen for writers on Leszno Street where the author was a manager.

⁷ The tension between a desire for the new language and attempts to rise to one’s own experience in Lewin’s journal was pointed out by L. Langer in his article *Social Suffering and Holocaust Atrocity*, (in:) *Social Suffering*, cont. A. Kleinman, V. Das, M. Lock, Berkeley 1997, 50-52.

⁸ The journal (not published yet) is kept in the archive of the Jewish History Institute in Warsaw, sign. Ring 1,641 and 654.

Dishes served in this kitchen (similarly to dozens of other places of this kind) were most often the only source of food for its clients. Beside the ones who were entitled to dinner coupons and who could pay for meals regularly, the kitchen attracted large groups of beggars counting on a spoonful of soul portraits of those “domestic” clients, as Rachela Auerback calls the unwanted consumers, are a significant part of the journal.

Rachela Auerback, born around 1903, was a writer before the war. Her origins were in Lviv and she had connections with the Polish-Jewish literary circles (promoting Jewish art and culture in Polish). She divided her time between the local kitchen and conspiracy practices in the Warsaw Ghetto Archive founded by a historian Emanuel Ringelblum. She remained in the Ghetto for almost the whole period of the existence of the closed district. Most probably, she went out to the Aryan side right after the January action in order to continue her conspiracy activities outside of the Ghetto (in the “headquarters” of the help centre for Jews hiding in Miodowa Street). She lived through the war and emigrated to Israel in 1950 where she died in 1976.⁹

The journal written by Rachela Auerbach is an exceptional document in terms of its literary qualities (as it was carried on by a writer). But not only. It is also a crucial study of the intensity of death experienced in the closed district – a document of immersion in the process of dying.

The author of the journal was alone in the Ghetto – her closest family (brother and his children) lived outside of Warsaw. As more rumors of mass deportations of Jewish communities reached the capital, she felt increasingly concerned about her kin. Loneliness and fear are very distinct in her account. Experiencing death alone also becomes a condition of experiencing her own “I” in a situation of danger. But due to that loneliness it is possible to observe the Ghetto with scrutiny. What characterizes Auerbach’s style of writing is the concentration on every detail of the Ghetto world and the ability to see and extract “metaphorical précis” out of this reality. Looking at the ghetto becomes a starting point to experiencing oneself. “The world of writing about oneself openly” and “the world of eye-witnessing” are visibly present in the journal and determine each other.

The function of the kitchen’s manager was to feed people. Triviality of such a statement conceals the drama behind the seemingly ordinary activity of sharing food. Distribution of food in the Warsaw Ghetto was neither banal nor innocent. Direct access to food articles – a privilege of very few – became the source of moral dilemmas. One

⁹ Basic information about biography of R. Auerbach was taken from the following publications: E. Prokop-Janiec, *Międzywojenna literatura polsko-żydowska jako zjawisko kulturowe i artystyczne*, Cracow, 1992; E. Ringelblum *Kronika getta warszawskiego*, transl. A. Rutkowski, Warsaw, 1983; Archiwum Ringelbluma. *Getto warszawskie lipiec 1942 – styczeń 1943*, elaborated by R. Sakowska, Warsaw, 1980; R. Sakowska, *Ludzie z dzielnicy zamkniętej. Z dziejów Żydów w Warszawie w latach okupacji hitlerowskiej październik 1939 – marzec 1943*, Warsaw, 1993; *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej. Polacy z pomocą Żydom 1939-1945*, elaborated by W. Bartoszewski i Z. Lewinówna, Warsaw, 1966; R. Low, *Ostatki polskie. Rzecz o izraelskiej prasie w języku polskim*, „Zeszyty Literackie” 1994 nr 4 (part II: 1995 no 1); letter by Mr Natan Gross (in my possession).

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of the usual practices was to give leftovers to beggars who “hanged about like hungry dogs around the carnage...as if being close to the ‘satiety’ area already brought them relief” (P 44). Rachela Auerbach supported chosen beggars more than others. Making “a choice,” a certain “selection” was followed by other dilemmas:

In order to do something for people in these circumstances, it was necessary to be occupied with this activity exclusively, and I often got offended when somebody judged me for having singled out this or that person and took care of them more than others. I justified it saying that fair distribution of insufficient benefits and incomplete help does not have any effect and is a waste – even though this is how I understood these things, obviously I was able to provide productive assistance to one person, neglecting my general duties, futile but unavoidable.

(P 53-54)

At the beginning, there is an illusion that we have a weapon to fight against everyday death. Why, death can be the result of certain deficiencies that could have been avoided:

The information (death of a friend) was like a heavy blow. For the first time since the bombing I cried so much. Sorrow of losing a person and my personal depression caused by ill-done work. I should probably have gone with him to Tozu and made sure he would get the injections, etc. (P 24)

Month after month, day by day, it turns out that selection of those who can receive soup is a superficial, symbolic choice, only confirming one’s own helplessness. A queue to get a plate of soup becomes a queue to a mass grave, a death queue. A plate of soup cannot defend us from the inescapable end:

What else could I do but give him soul gave him through S. 50 zlotys which had not been used for Braxmeier’s funeral but to rescue somebody who is already swollen from death, you need thousands. (P 40-41)

I was slowly growing a conviction that all the activities performed by our charity institutions should be called death in instalments. We should finally realize that we cannot rescue anyone from death, we don’t have such means. We can only postpone death, prolong it but not prevent it. In my practice, I did not succeed with anyone, not one person! (P 50)

The lack of means is juxtaposed to the extending procession of beggars. The queue of people in need never ends – a person who dies is immediately replaced by a few starving people:

[W]hen H. died the next day after a demonstration which he, as a member of the union, had organized himself by lying on the pavement in front of the gates, his daughter came to us with his dying wish to give her “his” portions of soup now. Then the Geboren family after the father’s death, Łabicki’s wife, etc. A plate of soup to wipe tears. (P 47)

The folk kitchen, so also Rachela Auerbach’s activities not only do not help but – according to the author – inscribe into a certain logic of events in the Ghetto and is only one of the elements leading to the expected death of all inhabitants of the Ghetto:

We are powerless, we work in the vacuum. The only effect of our work is that the whole ghetto will not be annihilated right away, that death is regulated and that we will gain just enough time to bury all the dead. It is impossible to change anyone's destiny. (P 51-52)

The first person plural consequently used by the author in her narrative seems to be not only a conventional form and a method to maintain the distance towards the feeling of co-responsibility. On the contrary, "we" become here a mask for the "I" which is clearly revealed in the next confession:

Terribly malicious and tactless, highly indiscreet was one acquaintance's gruesome joke that there is certain fatality in my care and all people I give special attention to have to die...I was really, really hurt. (P 50-51)

Numerous initiatives taken up by Rachela Auerbach paradoxically become the source of intensifying the chaos. The trajectory rises from intentional actions, while the irony of the situation is that each activity aiming at controlling the trajectory, i.e. taking initiative ends with a failure which magnifies the frustration. Subsequent failures, gradually destroying the feeling of having the reality under control, become a reason why the trajectory potential is piled up and multiplied. Institutional expectation patterns which put life in order and the biographic action scheme which contains, on the one hand, an element of intentionality, on the other hand, real possibilities to act, openly contradict with each other, adding to the impression of total disorientation.

Death of a close friend, Braxmeier,¹⁰ becomes a breakthrough, tangible "crossing the border" and entering the phase of passive reactions. It completely destroys orientation in the world because it is totally – even considering the conditions in the Ghetto – irrational. The man who dies was exceptionally "destined to live" (with regards to his physical features and special care offered by Rachela Auerbach). What is more, the person who dies was not only her friend, but a symbol of "being able to survive":

I obtained money and packages trying to give Braxmeier belated, as it turned out, he said that it would be a real shame and failure to our kitchen, to all our social help work; I said that it would be my personal shame and failure if we didn't rescue from starvation the only man we cared about. The man who was a true evidence, the man who survived "that" and another "that" as one of a dozen out of one hundred went through it alive and survived something all the rest died from – this particular man could not bear our social help system...I said it at a wrong time that the old Mrs Feld would outlive him. About 25 years younger than her, athletic, iron man, once a sports champion. (P 16)

The increasing feeling of helplessness towards the overwhelming death, terror and sorrow permeates through the entire text of the journal. "And who else, who else (died)?" becomes a narrative link illustrating the process of absorption and the inability to handle the excess of death. In the case of each of the kitchen clients there is no accidental death, on the contrary, there are no possibilities to play the game of life and avoid death. Eve-

¹⁰ In this case, the "passive reaction phase" is not literal resignation from acting. Rachela Auerbach still fulfils her duties as a kitchen's manager. It is rather about automated reactions deprived of hope for actions to actually be effective.

ryone is doomed to the common grave, while treacherous time brings us closer to that moment, which is expressed by the metaphor of flowing:

Down all roads and paths leading to Geşia (where the cemetery was – M.M.) briskly swim black carts and prams. One by one. As if streams, tributaries of a great river which absorbs everything. (P 39)

Living in the waiting-room to death sharpens the senses. Time of the journal is the condensed present, intensified “now.” Rachela Auerbach’s diary focuses on the everyday life, the everyday reality of the Ghetto. The category of everyday plays a special role. But everyday life in the Ghetto does not blot out existential anxiety, it rather sharpens it, constantly reminding us of the tangible presence of death. Corpses lying on the streets become the everyday view and an average, ordinary man will have to face this reality:

Where does an ordinary man, an average Jew of our times find strength for such death, what can be comforting to him when he’s been awaiting his execution for weeks? (D 3)

Analyzing the experience of concentration camps’ prisoners, A. Keþiński indicated that after crossing a certain border of tolerance of the unusual, prisoners defended themselves from the surrounding reality treating what was happening as a nightmare.¹¹ “Just like a sleeping person escapes from a nightmare thinking this is just a dream, the prisoners’ defence from the camp nightmare was the feeling of de-realization, the unreality of what surrounds them,”¹² claims A. Keþiński and this exactly the case of Rachela Auerbach. How to avoid the reality which is impossible to be handled? One cannot run away from the Ghetto, therefore the author finds her own way to tackle the reality. Her strategy is to dream the nightmare till the end. The journal is a place where this might be done.

Given notes often resemble frozen film frames, each experience and image undergoes enormous intensification, augmentation. The reality of the closed district prepares “strangely clear symbolic short-cuts” (D 1), which are animated by Rachela Auerbach – like an experienced film director – on the pages of her journal.

The world of the Ghetto reveals to her its grotesque nature: it gets distorted in a gigantic false mirror and is reduced to absurd. The grotesque becomes the only possible method to domesticate the chaos of the Ghetto and also to register it.¹³ It is not only the cultural category but also the existential one. It expresses uniqueness of personal experience but remains the language of culture. The most characteristic example is a description of “the dead’s fair” in the morgue:

And so they were lying there in front of us (illegible) inert dead people. There are very few “decent” places in the “factory”...merely 15 or 20...They are lying and pretending they don’t see, they are trying not to look at those who are lying by the walls, thrown on each other, one along, another crosswise, someone face up, another face down, one more in an impossible,

¹¹ A. Keþiński, *Nightmare*, (in:) *The Rhythm of Life*, Cracow 1994.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹³ On the grotesque as a means of describing the reality of the Ghetto in R. Auerbach’s journal, cf. J. Leociak, *Text...*

arch-acrobatic position – on a pile. In piles. There is also segregation. Men and women separately. Children also separated. Here or there a dead child's body rolls down. One of them was delightfully spread out, 2- or 3-year-old kid with his arms bent in elbows, and with fists as if they were to wipe the eyes in a sleepy stretch...Here and there the rustle of paper can be heard. One of the corpses is looking for a more comfortable position, maybe trying to straighten the bones in private. (P 33-34)

Outside, in front of the factory, in a flume, I saw a few half rotten dead bodies...The stink was horrifying but curiosity made me look at it." (P 36-37)

The multiplied terror of the Ghetto, its absurd unreality is so protective that it allows us to break a taboo: the author is looking at the decomposing bodies. Looking in the face of a corpse, breaking the taboo and watching death deprived of its dignity not only evokes fascination. The embodied and literalized death – given the status of personified existence – makes the horrified author recognize her own end. She smells the putrid odour of her own skin:

It seems like a sweet, putrid smell. Characteristic, different than the smell of animal carcass, the smell of human carcass. Don't we know this smell well enough, don't we sometimes smell it on our sweaty skin, wouldn't we recognize it immediately without any guidelines, even if we felt it for the first time? (P 32)

Rachela Auerbach, immersed in the world of the closed district, totally absorbed within it, presents to us the tragic "world upside down," the world where everyday life loses its primary attribute: routine, where the boundaries between life and death are blurred ("buried alive," writes Rachela Auerbach). Life becomes a seeming activity because the only possible strategy of life is to wait passively for death. All other activities are performed in the vacuum, the author completely loses control over her life. The feeling of total danger, automation, uncommonness, and helplessness – therefore all attributes of a nightmare (or a trajectory) – prevails over an individual. The only possible reaction turns out to be an attempt to domesticate the trajectory by means of getting closer to it, immersing in it consciously.

Embodiment of death: a corpse can be considered as an emblem of the whole Ghetto experience of Rachela Auerbach. It becomes not a metaphor of the subject's personal death but a strong and real analogy. What shall one do looking straight in the eyes of one's own death? The only answer the author finds is: not to lose consciousness in the middle of the inferno but remember and write down. Language is everything that we can set against death (especially when it is a language of the grotesque, then it is possible to ridicule the reality). Trust for the language becomes a straw a drowning man clutches at.

Disregarded Trajectory: Janusz Korczak

The most dramatic last three years of Janusz Korczak's life overlap with the war. In November 1940, Korczak moves with his pupils to the Ghetto area. Leaving the orphanage by Korczak and the children in order to move to the closed district starts the most tragic period in their life. They not only left a safe home but were also thrown into the

strange inferno of the Ghetto, into hunger, sickness, and death. During the moving process, Korczak was arrested and spent one month in prison, which exhausted him physically and emotionally. After getting released, he had to take the responsibility of providing food supply to all of his orphans. He was responsible for two hundred children who – till the very end – he tried to save from the nightmare of the Ghetto (originally, one hundred children lived in the orphanage but during the war this number radically increased). It was for them that he went around gene institutions and private people begging for food. In February 1942, he took up another undertaking: he tried to rescue children from the Main House of Shelter which had truly become a place for the dying.¹⁴ The only time that was free from intense and exhaustive work were moments in the evening or at night when the entire house was asleep, Korczak devoted those moments to write a diary which – together with documents tracked down in 1988 – constitutes the primary source of knowledge about the Ghetto life of Korczak (and his pupils).¹⁵

The figure of Korczak, his life and particularly his death, became the source of a legend. The subject of the debate is not Janusz Korczak – the famous social worker, writer, pedagogue whose ideas changed the perception of the process of bringing up a child. All over the world, there are hundreds of publications devoted to this legendary personage. Instead, the interest focuses on the old, tired man with a duty to provide for two hundred children thrown with him into the ghetto reality. In other words, I would like to concentrate on subjective judgements and experiences of one of the participants of the Ghetto drama in a situation of continuous threat. Therefore, I am interested in Korczak as an author of *Diary*, letters, and articles in the weekly paper published in the House of Orphans during their stay in the Ghetto. These texts are also treated as personal documents both being the source of knowledge about Korczak's life in the Ghetto and offering insight directly into his experiences and emotions related with the Ghetto.

When Korczak began to write his diary, he was 63 or 64 years old. He started making notes in January 1940; after a break, he went back to writing his observations down as late as in May 1942. He regularly conducted the journal by August of the same year. The last note dates back to 4 August 1942 – it was made a few days before his death in one of Treblinka's gas chamber (the exact date of Korczak and his orphans' transport to the concentration camp is not known, it most probably happened on 6 August 1942, the date of Korczak's death remains unknown either – 7 or 8 August). In the course of time, the regularly noted down memories began to be focused more on current events and gradually turned into a journal.

Korczak's *Diary* was an effect of combining and confronting elements of autobiography, diary, and journal. Autobiographical bits scattered in the text (this is how Korczak himself talks about his notes) in fact compose the entire life of the author. Memories

¹⁴ Detailed biographic information concerning the life of Janusz Korczak in the Ghetto, cf. A. Lewin, *When the end was coming... The last years of Janusz Korczak's life*, Warsaw 1996 and id. *Korczak known and unknown*, Warsaw 1999.

¹⁵ I used the following editions: Janusz Korczak *The Diary*, (in:) id. *Selection of works*, vol. 4, Warsaw 1958; *Janusz Korczak in the Ghetto. New Sources*, Warsaw 1992.

stand close to loose reflections and opinions resulting from years spent on watching people and the world. Further, we can also find fragments being *ad hoc* observations with no time perspective. These parts are characterized by the intimate and mysterious aura and appear to be utterly direct and spontaneous – typical of a journal. In Korczak's *Diary* time perspectives cross: from the ghetto towards the past and the memories but also into the future, towards new plans. The clash of various perspectives, the mixture of autobiography, diary, and journal elements is emphasized by intra-textual tension, but it might also become a starting point for the analysis of Janusz Korczak's experience in the Ghetto.

“Who describes someone else's pain, as if they were stealing, taking advantage of the misery, as if they wanted more” (537), writes the author, somewhat declaring to ignore in his notes crimes that surrounded him and to avoid archiving current events. A few pages earlier, he “forgot to mention that there is war” (514) and it was a note made in May 1942. The overall assumption is that memories are a dominant element:

There is a risk that I will repeat myself more often. What is even worse, facts and experiences may be, must be and will be reported differently. That's nothing. It only proves that these were important moments I deeply felt and to which I keep going back. It also shows that memories depend on our present experiences. (536)

Of course, the majority of *Diary* takes form of nostalgic memories related with his childhood and later professional life, memories that are bright and innocent. However, we might risk a statement that despite the domination of “diary elements” in terms of the volume, Korczak's text still keeps his journal character. Not only because, obviously, “memories depend on our present experiences” and our current situation influences the assessment of the past. In his *Diary* Korczak goes further: he makes past events sound like they are happening now, he looks at current events through the prism of the past. He does it in a manner allowing us to find the reflection of his contemporary psychological states in his account of events that are historical to him. It is illustrated by the memory of his first death experience (death of a canary):

I wanted to put a cross on its (the canary's) grave. The servant told me that it was a bird, something much lower than a human being. It is even a sin to cry. That's for the servant. What is worse, the caretaker's son said the canary was Jewish. And me too. I was Jewish and he was Polish, Catholic. He is going to paradise and, after I die, – if I don't curse and bring him sugar stolen from home – I would go to a place which is not hell but it's dark out there. And I was scared of a dark room. Death – Jew – hell. Black Jewish paradise. There was a lot to think about. (513)

Inseparably connected with the nationality problem and punishment for being different, this was the earliest experience of death noted down by Korczak in May 1942, being already inside of the “black Jewish paradise”:

An old man (a beggar who collected money after the Nativity play – M.M.). Nothing but him. Him in the first row. He was insatiable. His bag got filled with first, indifferent parental silver coins, then, my own strenuously gathered copper. Bitterly experienced and educated, I collected it for a long time, from wherever I could. An old man in the street was often the victim; I thought, “I will not give it to him, I will hide it for my Nativity play old man. My old man

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was never satisfied and his bag was never full...The old man from Miodowa, after the desperate siege of Warsaw, taught me a lot. Helplessness of defence from importunate begging and endless demands that cannot be fulfilled. (529-530)

– writes Korczak in the period when he was responsible for feeding the entire orphanage (the note made on 15 May 1942).

My frequently returning dream and project was to leave for China....I did not go to China but China came to me. Chinese hunger, Chinese misery of orphans, Chinese death of children.
(536-537)

The above quotes indicate that Korczak was completely immersed in the Ghetto reality, even though he “forgot to mention that there is war.” “Recalling” that, Korczak not only makes the past sound present and affirms the reality of the past, but he also goes deeper into the reality of the Ghetto. Not so much does he reinterpret the past as he interprets the present. The past, even bright and innocent, cannot become an analgesic for a man who is thrown into the horror of the Ghetto.

Notes in Korczak’s *Diary* not only refer to the particularly sensitive fact of “touching the Ghetto,” to the focused reflection over the reality of the Ghetto which becomes a test to all past experiences of the author. They are also an evidence that, day by day, he loses the sense of predictability of life; the permanent, the well-known and the ordered no longer provides an illusion of stability, the future is unknown, a man faces unknown, unpredictable forces alone, as if there was already a storm above their head:

Where will the clouds come from? What kind of invisible ohms, volts, neon signs will gather to create a coming thunder or wind from the dessert and when will it happen? The tormenting question, “Did I act right or wrong?” becomes morose accompaniment for the carefree children’s breakfast. (541)

Now, when I know that I don’t know and why I don’t know, whenever I can, according to the basic claim: “Do not harm the sick,” I swim into the unknown waters. (556)

Spit and go away. I’ve thought about it for so long. More – noose – led my feet. (588)

The Ghetto reality is unpredictable, whereas little everyday activities become the source of misery:

Are honest people from higher levels permanently doomed to Calvary? (518)

Help, Almighty! Let them stop asking, begging, talking...I would like to have nothing, so that they can see I have nothing, to let it all end. I came back from the “round” crushed. Seven visits, conversations, stairs, questions. The result: 50 zlotys and declared 5 zlotys monthly. You can support two hundred people! I go to sleep in my clothes. The first hot day. I can’t sleep, and at 9 pm we hold an educational meeting. (543)

Speaking of the general concept of trajectory, Gerhard Riemann and Fritz Schutze defined it as a category describing a biographic chain of events which disturb the control over one’s life, making an individual feel pushed from that moment on. Korczak talks about this state metaphorically: “noose and lead at my feet,” “unknown waters,” the storm, Calvary.

Suffering caused by helplessness towards the inevitable fate intrudes the sphere of one's identity. The identity's image undergoes transformation. Alienation towards oneself entails changes in defining one's identity. Suffering, which becomes the basic indicator of the "I," is at the same time impossible to communicate.¹⁶ "Who am I now?" asks Korczak from within the trajectory:

An old blind Jew was left in Myszyniec. He walked with his stick among carts, horses, cossacks, cannons. What a cruelty to leave a blind old man alone.

They wanted to take him with them, says Naścia, but he insisted on staying, because somebody needs to watch the synagogue.

I met Nastka when I helped her find a bucket taken away from her by a soldier who was supposed to bring it back but he never did. I am the blind Jew and Nastka. (594)

Does the story from the author's life gain the meaning of a great metaphor, a parable about the necessity to defend one's values and about the fate of a guard of those values (this is how this fragment was commented on by Irena Maciejewska).¹⁷ This is surely also the case. I believe that the fundamental matter, however, is a possibility to experience oneself and to communicate the identity of the "I." If understanding a metaphor may serve as a key to comprehend longer texts,¹⁸ or the whole discourse, we might risk a statement that the "blind Jew and Nastka" metaphor opens the reader to the experience of Janusz Korczak's Ghetto trajectory. The figures of this trajectory are a cheated child and a helpless, groping old man. A metaphor needs linguistic tension in order to maintain tension in the image of reality. This tension, following the words of Paul Ricoeur, takes place "not between the words but within the auxiliary itself."¹⁹ The irremovable opposition between the language (verbalization) and the experience of oneself and one's own suffering leads Korczak to radical expressions. The metaphor of the torn identity evokes a one-time, momentary clasp of the sense inside of "I am" which reveals the "deep suffering I," the deepest individual identity beyond its social identity.

One of the most controversial fragments of *Diary* is *History's Programme Speech*. The author presents the Nazis' point of view using their most rational arguments.²⁰ From the external perspective, with the eyes of a German, he tries to not only look at the Ghetto reality but he also tries to see himself:

¹⁶ On inability to communicate and alienation in suffering, cf. Ricoeur *Philosophy of a Person*, transl. M. Frankiewicz, Cracow 1992, eschapter *Suffering is not pain*.

¹⁷ I. Maciejewska *Janusz Korczak's Diary*, (in:) *Janusz Korczak – life and work*, materials from the International Scientific Session, Warsaw, October 12-13, 1978, ed. H. Kirchner, A. Lewin, S. Wołoszyn, Warsaw, 1982, 256.

¹⁸ Cf. Ricoeur, *Language, text, interpretation. Selection of works*, transl. Graffi, K. Rosner, Warsaw 1989, 256.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁰ Cf. I. Maciejewska, *Janusz...*, 256. <http://rcin.org.pl>

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You are a social worker? Here is a plan. You can pretend for some time and we will pretend to believe. We generally believe until it is comfortable and in what is comfortable to us. I'm sorry: uncomfortable. What has been planned. (589)

German thinking becomes a mirror in which the author can see himself clearly. See himself somewhat "from outside," from another point of view, looking as if through binoculars, but the other way around. Giving place to the German on the pages of his intimate notes turns into the closest possible encounter with another person, although they both take radically different positions. Understanding the other is a condition to understand and express oneself. The last observation in *Diary* displays a desire for such an encounter and for understanding, although on the formal level, "he" and "I" are vividly distinguished (both in terms of grammar and physically; they are separated by the space between the window and the sentinel where the German is standing):

I'm watering flowers. My bold head in the window – such a good aim. He has a rifle. Why is he standing and looking calmly? He has not been given an order. Or maybe, being a civilian, he was a country teacher, a notary, a street sweeper in Leipzig, or a waiter in Cologne? What would he do if I nodded in his direction, waved to him friendly? Maybe he doesn't even know how it is here? He might have just come yesterday from far away. (599)

In his memory of Myszyniec, from the period of the First World War, the author finds himself in the experience of the other by means of the encounter and by going deep into "he"; through integrating the others' experiences, he discovers himself. In *Speech...* "he" (the German) takes over the competences of "I" (the author) so that the author could look at himself from outside as well. This emphatic narrative is deprived of its boundaries because there are continuous attempts to give voice to "the other."

Incessant tension between "I" and "he" permeates through the above quoted fragments. The opposition of "I-subject" and "he-object belonging to the outside world" is abolished. Such attitude is radically implemented in a part of the diary, where "the other" completely takes over the author's competences. At the same time, the experience of "the other" gets included into the experience of the speaking subject and integrated into the "I." The text becomes a space due to which, by creating "the other," it is possible to experience oneself (an attempt to reach someone else's way of thinking is located within clearly drawn frames of the autobiography).

Everyday distress, being lost in the Ghetto reality, is such a painful experience that it is necessary to look for breathing space. Even a momentary chance to hide from the insane stream of stirring events brings comfort.

For a short moment, one's own bed at night becomes the only asylum. Days are hard (518), arduous (534, 538), exhausting (595), full of hostile and morbid emotions and experiences (595). The bed and the night are definitely assessed in a positive manner, they become extraterritorial, entirely excluded. Living in the rhythm of day and night becomes a method to save one's own privacy:

Five glasses of spirit with hot water give me inspiration. It is followed by the delightful feeling of painless exhaustion because the scar doesn't count and "twinging" legs don't count, even hurting eyes or a burning scrotum do not count. Inspiration makes me aware of the fact

that I am lying in my bed and it will last till the morning comes. So twelve hours of normal functioning of lungs, heart and thoughts. After a busy day. In my mouth, the taste of cabbage and garlic, and a caramel candy I have put in the glass. Epicurean...I'm feeling good, quiet and safe...so quiet and safe. (538)

Be greeted, beautiful silence of the night.(542)

It's so soft and warm in my bed. It will be very hard for me to get up. (594)

What is characteristic in Korczak's account is similarity of his personal experience of day and night and the Jewish philosophy of time. Korczak lives in the rhythm of "tiring day" and "comforting night." It seems that his time is absolutely private: neglecting the "time of the Ghetto" which consists of subsequent extermination actions. It turns out that in the Jewish tradition, the night is explicitly superior to the day. It is darkness that is a special and solemn time with traits of happiness.

All Jewish holidays are marked with intense preparation the day before, after which, by the sunset and together with first stars in the sky, there is a radical change, going from acting to resting, from the secular to the sacred.²¹

We might risk a metaphorical statement that Korczak lives in the Ghetto having his private, everyday Shabbat. Neglecting the "gene time" becomes one of the elements of neglecting the Ghetto trajectory, an element of being faithful to the private ritual.

Responsibility for the orphanage (then for two orphanages) held by Janusz Korczak in the Ghetto forced him to constant activities. Perhaps it would be difficult to find another person who would be so full of initiatives. Providing for the orphanage, working on reorganization of the Main House of Shelter, working on different projects aiming at improving the fate of children in the Ghetto (such as organization of a unit for mortally ill and dying children of the streets, cf. NZ, 63) – these are some of his everyday activities. Letters, articles, reports he wrote in the Ghetto show him as an energetic man, full of ideas and unstoppable in his efforts to improve children's life. But also rough and ruthless, if it was required to help orphanages:

He begged, threatened, argued. He didn't care who would donate and whether it would be enough for others. He was a father of two hundred children and he had to provide for them. This was another Korczak...Tired, irritated, suspicious, prepared to make a big fuss about a barrel of cabbage, a sack of flour.²²

Does this image not stand in contradiction to the picture of the "blind Jew and Nastka" coming out of Korczak's *Diary*? Can a man who is "pushed," impelled by the Ghetto trajectory, simultaneously make plans and, what is more, (even if partially) carry out his plans? In order to answer this question, it would be worth looking into the way Korczak assessed his actions himself:

²¹ A. Neher, *Visions of time and history in the Jewish culture*, transl. B. Chwedeczek, (in:) *time in Culture*, Warsaw, 1988, 279.

²² I. Newerly, Introductory note to J. Korczak, *Diary*, (in:) J. Korczak, *Selection of works*, vol. 4, 506.

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A thought. A barber does hair, a manicurist (sic) takes care of nails of a convict who is on his way to the gallows. The second thought: an owner of the circus strenuously tames animals in order to have them killed once they are tamed. (NZ, 131)

What do they want from me? A merchant woman reacted to the claims of a buyer:
– Dear Mrs, these are not goods, this is not a shop, you are not a client and I am not a seller, I don't sell and you don't pay me...Only, one needs to do something, right? (552)

Despite its tragic nature or due to it, the reality of the Ghetto reveals its grotesque character. Every action remains superficial, self-deceiving. This is how Korczak perceives his work. His work is doomed to failure because it is impossible to fulfil the needs of the Ghetto inhabitants and there is scarcity of food and medicaments. In *History's Programme Speech* Korczak sees his work as a part of Nazis' plan. This is why it is doomed to failure from the very beginning. Is there a more dramatic description of his attempts to save the children than his comparison to the barber who does the convict's hair before the execution? Further he writes that life in the Ghetto is "A mental house. A game house. Monaco. Stake-head." (595)

A fool and pretender, a helpless pawn, a player who passively submits to the fate – this is how he judges himself. But can he stop working? Can the blind Jew leave the synagogue?

Korczak's activities in the Ghetto are not the embodiment of the trajectory domestication, the attempt to control it – on the contrary, they strengthen the trajectory. The feeling of being lost and the need to act make each other stronger, becoming two sides of the same reality between which there is two-way feedback.

Is it possible to get out of the vicious circle of self-propelling misery? Death could be the only escape.

The reflection over death accompanied Korczak throughout his whole life. It was not only linked with his profession but it also concerned his personal experiences: death of his mother for whom Korczak felt responsible (she died of typhus, after being infected by her son whom she took care of during his illness). His plan to commit suicide matured in him through the years:

If I kept postponing my thoroughly designed plan (of suicide), it was because always in the last moment, a new dream emerged which I could not leave without trying to work on it. (535)

In the Ghetto, Korczak always carried morphine in his pocket. A large part of *Diary* is devoted to thoughts on euthanasia, which he considered as a sign of mercy.²³

I feel smudged, stained with blood and stinking. Cunning since I'm alive – I sleep, I eat, I sometimes even joke. (566)

After the war, for a long time people will not be able to look in each other's eyes not to see the following question: how is it that you are alive, that you survived? What did you do? (567)

²³ The last spectacle in the Orphanage was also devoted to death. It was *The Post Office* by Rabindranath Tagore. To the main character of the play, a sick Indian boy Amal, death stands for salvation and it is embodied by dreamed of life on the king's court.

Life, therefore, became a subject and a reason to be ashamed, while death – a duty of an ethical man. “A bastard might live to see his grey hair” (596). Korczak did not commit suicide. He didn’t decide to escape, to stop the trajectory. In his ceaseless confrontation with death, without illusions regarding this further life and the fate of the entire closed district, he remained alive.

The dynamics of chaos, the unpredictable stream of events, which engages a person thrown into the Ghetto, finds its embodiment in the biographic process that affects Janusz Korczak. Being completely dependent on external forces and conscious effort to ignore them make the biography of an individual and the external reality intertwine. The world of the Ghetto intruded the individual fate and penetrated it. In the trajectory of chaotic events, Korczak escapes into the story about himself. But searching for his identity in new circumstances determined by the closed area of the Ghetto becomes a story about experiencing the reality of extermination (without notice, the diary turns into the journal). And on the contrary – keeping to the well-known system of actions, the everyday ritual of obtaining food helps Korczak realize that it is impossible to control the trajectory. Actions which are supposed to oppose and neglect chaos, become a part of the chaos which make it even more intense. The trajectory’s disorder is stopped only once: during the encounter with the other who “might have come here only yesterday from far away.”

The three exemplary biographies constitute a story about a personal experience of the final situation. They show effort to find support in the world where everything changed and resembles a chaotic whirl which destroys predictability and sucks everybody in. The feeling of being together, language, personal ritual, or an encounter with the other may stop the trajectory for a moment. However, the only permanent factor remains the sense of identity which is newly defined in the border situation.

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