Piotrkowskie Zeszyty Historyczne, t. 22 (2021), z. 1, s. 41-60
www.ihpt.pl/pzh

DOI: 10.25951/4347

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Medicine in the Service of Nazism and other Silesian Stories – Reconstructing "Memory Shot Through with Holes" in Anna Dziewit-Meller's *Góra Tajget*

Medycyna w służbie nazizmu i inne śląskie historie – rekonstrukcja „pamięci podziurawionej" w *Górze Tajget* Anny Dziewitt-Meller

Abstract

The article discusses the literary reconstruction of the "memory shot through with holes" (H. Raczymow) in Anna Dziewit-Meller's *Góra Tajget* (*Mount Taygetus*). The author analyses how this moral treatise set against the backdrop of the tale about three generations of a Silesian family as well as German eugenic operations fills the empty spaces in history and memory. In this process, the category of the body plays a unique role – one that is supervised by Nazi medicine, as well that which serves as a medium of what has been repressed from consciousness. Another key element of the text is the multiplied figure of the child, which binds together all the stories and accentuates the role of autobiographical factors in postmemorial discourse. Finally, the author examines how the anomalies of the discourse present in the book destroy the comfort of reading, and the literature, presented in an ethical perspective, becomes one of the most important discourses on responsibility, ethics (also medical) and human condition.

Abstrakt

Artykuł poświęcony jest omówieniu literackich sposób rekonstrukcji „pamięci podziurawionej" (H. Raczymow) w *Górze Tajget* Anny Dziewit-Meller. Autorka artykułu analizuje, w jaki sposób ten moralny traktat wpisany w trójpokoleniową historię śląskiej rodziny i niemieckich akcji eugenicznych wypełnia

puste miejsca w historii i pamięci. Szczególną rolę w tym procesie pełni kategoria ciała – zarówno tego pod nadzorem hitlerowskiej medycyny, jak i ciała jako nośnika tego, co wyparte ze świadomości. Drugim kluczowym elementem tekstu jest multiplikowana figura dziecka, spajająca wszystkie opowieści i akcentująca role czynników autobiograficznych w dyskursie postmemorialnym. Wreszcie autorka śledzi, jak obecne w książce anomalie dyskursu burzą komfort lekturowy, a literatura ujmowana w perspektywie etycznej staje się jednym z ważniejszych dyskursów na temat odpowiedzialności, etyki (także lekarskiej) i kondycji ludzkiej.

Keywords: empty spaces in memory, body as a medium of postmemory, literature and Nazi medicine, postmemorial discourse
Słowa kluczowe: „pamięć podziurawiona", ciało jako nośnik postpamięci, literatura wobec medycyny hitlerowskiej, dyskurs tożsamościowy i postmemorialny

For history teaches us that those who do not remember the past
are condemned to repeating it in the future[1]

In one of the opening pages of the chapter titled *Adik*, which concludes *Góra Tajget* ("Mount Taygetus") by Anna Dziewit-Meller, we find the following passage:

> Theoretically, they were only supposed to visit the area around Frankfurt, where Karlchen's family had moved, but on the way there – as the online guidebook describes – there is so much splendour! Nuremberg, for example. Such a lovely place! Those tenements with Gothic vaults, those shops with local products, those restaurants full of happy people! [...] Karolina reads about the Nuremberg Toy Museum in her guidebook. "Let's go with the child! Nuremberg is the city of toys! The whole world used to know about it, until it forgot."[2]

The story of young parents enjoying the tourist attractions of Nuremberg several decades after the war is an ironic reminder of the cultural amnesia associated with the events of World War Two (the world used to know, until it forgot), and

[1] S. Sterkowicz, *Nieludzka medycyna. Lekarze w służbie nazizmu*, Warsaw 2007, p. 11.
[2] A. Dziewit-Meller, *Góra Tajget*, Warsaw 2016, p. 116 (e-book).

at the same time a telling commentary on the stories we learn in Dziewit-Meller's book. Nuremberg – a city which, after Hitler's rise to power, gradually turns into a utopian city of the future, on 15 September 1935 is the arena of the Nuremberg Laws, and later houses the International Military Tribunal, which tried Nazi war criminals in 1945–46 – on the pages of the novel becomes, literally and metaphorically, the stage of a spectacle in which the sinister giggle of history is particularly haunting. At the toy museum, amidst horrifying porcelain dolls with vacant eyes, replicas of bourgeois houses or railway tracks models, there is also a collection of World War Two figurines. It includes grotesque puppets in Nazi uniforms, which, somewhere on the sidelines, away from the visitors' attention, are conducting a meeting concerning the euthanasia of children, which became a prelude to the Holocaust before World War Two.

As Meller writes,

> The toy museum is visited by children on a school trip. It gets loud and crowded. The leader and his entourage immediately take strategic positions, on and around the lectern. Tea cools down in microscopic cups on the table at the Grand Hotel apartment by the Baltic Sea. Children with black faces, with slanted eyes, in yarmulkes and scarves on their heads, peer at subsequent displays [...]. They talk to one another in German, laughing and pushing.[3]

The clash between the grotesque theatre of the Nazi puppets and a group of multiracial German children is an ironic encounter between the past and the present, but it is underpinned by the fear that at any time, at some seaside hotel, the tea at a meeting might not be actually getting cold, and that history is not just a puppet theatre. The story of Adolf Hitler, saved from drowning in the Danube by a childhood friend, carries a similar counter-factual meaning. "Then there would have been no *ein Reich*, *ein Führer*, no crematorium in Auschwitz, no Luminal in a hospital in Lubliniec, no ghosts in Muranów. *Perhaps*."[4] The author seems to follow alternative paths – the past seen in the museum is blurred under the pressure of current events. The experiences of children and their parents from the time of the Second World War cannot be compared to the tired parents of little Małgosia. However, in the final sentence of the book, they become infused with new meanings in the context of history, although it is possible to take away their authenticity: "Karolina, Sebastian and Małgosia,

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 130.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 125. Emphasis A.G.

who is crying once again, are walking towards the hotel, maybe the little one will fall asleep, maybe when she sleeps, she will be in a better mood, because now, looking at her performance, having children is the last thing you would want."[5] As a difficult child, little Karolina would probably have been positively verified in a eugenic programme, but now, several decades after the war, her whining provokes dislike at most. That is why we need to remind and remember. Dziewit-Meller herself admits that the scale of the denial and silence about the uncomfortable aspects of history was one of the most important incentives for writing the book.[6] In this inspiration, historical themes are closely linked to family history – and History turns into a drama of individuals, not figures in a mock-up. And although the book does not say more than would have been written in historical studies from that period, it serves as a moving reminder, as it is strongly marked by a postmemory trace and an overall moral message that cannot be overlooked in interpretation. As one of the reviewers wrote, "This is a story that brings us closer to the truths that we would not have had the strength to bear without the help of an artist."[7] It is easy to distance oneself from life experience, while Dziewit-Meller's story seems more true than reality itself. This is not because the author makes exceptionally meticulous use of historical sources; instead, she builds a fictitious world that moves and touches us as if we were co-participants, without giving up references to historical facts that we are unable to challenge. This conglomeration of truth and fiction, of great History and the history of individual people touches us and destroys the comfort of reading, constantly reminding us that, even if it is a truism, history likes to repeat itself.

The key category that makes it possible for the interpretative framework to cover all the themes and characters presented in the book is the category of

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[5] *Ibidem*, p. 130.

[6] In one of the interviews, the author admits to being inspired by the story of Anna Rosmus and her book *Out of Passau. Leaving a city Hitler called Home*. For Meller, it was particularly shocking that the inhabitants of Passau, a city on the border between Germany and Austria, were so successful in repressing the awareness that Hitler's family had once lived there, that upon learning of the book on the subject they nearly lynched the author. As a result, Rosmus was forced to emigrate from Germany and now lives in the USA. See P. Reiter, *Zbrodnie na chorych psychicznie były preludium do Holocaustu*; interview with A. Dziewit-Meller, https://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/1,53662,19613666,zbrodnie-na-chorych-psychicznie-byly-swoistym-preludium-do-holocaustu.html (accessed 10 August 2020).

[7] P. Bravo, *Ciało swoje, ciało obce. O „Górze Tajget" Anny Dziewit-Meller*; https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2016/04/05/pawel-bravo-recenzja-gora-tajget/ (accessed 31 July 2020)

'memory shot through with holes'. Its essence is – as Anna Ciarkowska writes – the relationship between the "untold" and the "told", including the process of disappearance of the story, which becomes emptiness and turns into silence. It is around it that the postmemory structure develops, forcing us to answer the question of what used to be there and now is empty.[8] According to Henri Raczymow, this kind of postmemory emptiness feeds itself, tames underdefined places, and by projecting what it cannot remember, it makes the relation to the object or source of the story mediated not by memory, but by imagination. This half-heard or half-read, half-imagined memory is an overwhelming force shaping the identity and attitude of subsequent generations towards the past. This is the case with the author of *Góra Tajget*, who in her book sets the history of Silesian families, including her own, within the history of German eugenic operations. The author dedicates the book to her grandparents and her children – the generation that remembers and the generation that should carry that memory on, thus building the foundation of its own identity. Filling in the blank spaces of family and collective history is a necessary condition for this process and warrants the understanding of today's social and political processes.

The factor that binds all five stories together is the denunciation of the criminal, distorted role of medicine in human history and the reflection on the role of the body, which becomes a carrier of postmemory. A separate cohesive element of the presented world is the figure of the child, which in various ways is crucial for each story, also referring to the author's autobiographical experience. Dziewit-Meller admitted that the experience of motherhood, including her profound fear for her children and their future, was one of the most important incentives for this book.[9] The key role of the child's figure in the narrative is already suggested by the title itself – Mount Taygetus, a place where, according to legend, weak or crippled newborns, unfit for the harsh lives in the *polis,* were thrown into the abyss. That primordial selection returns in the era of crematoria, although this time it does not take place on the edge of a cliff, but with the assistance of doctors and behind hospital walls.

The narrative axis of the novel is the euthanasia programme for mentally disabled people, also known as *Aktion T4*.[10] It was closely linked to racist theo-

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[8] A. Ciarkowska, *Kto ma pamięć podziurawioną? O koncepcji postpamięci według Henriego Raczymowa*, „Politeja" 2015, no. 3, p. 189–199.

[9] P. Reiter, *op. cit.*

[10] The operation was named after the street in Berlin, Tiergarten 4, where its headquarters were located. See: S. Serkowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 47–69.

ries, according to which "racially defective" individuals stood in the way of the racial perfection of the German nation. This was the first and main type of argument preceding the "euthanasia campaign" that was raised after Hitler came to power. Another cited economic reasons, emphasising the 'burden' that the state has to bear in maintaining disabled individuals. While the first type of argument was reflected in programme statements (e.g. in *Mein Kampf*), the second type of justification was used when it came to laying the psychological ground work for *Aktion T4*. Propaganda campaign involved attempts to sway public opinion by means of films and various educational materials. For example, one of the tasks of a mathematics textbook by Adolf Borner (published in 1935) was: "The construction of a madhouse costs RM 6 million. How many new flats can be built for this sum if one flat costs RM 15,000?"[11] And although discussions on the admissibility of euthanasia for mentally ill people continued to divide the medical community, at the beginning of 1939 there was a case which strengthened this project significantly. Hitler's office received a letter in which the father of a crippled newborn requested that he be granted official consent to kill his son. Hitler had the matter handled by Karl Brandt, who was in charge of the euthanasia campaign. The child was killed with sleeping pills, and that first death officially launched *Aktion T4*, that is to say the organised euthanasia of so-called superfluous "bread-eaters", people who did not contribute any benefits to the Reich, mainly the mentally and terminally ill, both adults and children. The antedating of Hitler's regulation on this subject, in fact passed October but signed on 1 September 1939, was intended to highlight the special circumstances of the state of war, making it possible to kill all those who, for racial, health or even political reasons, were considered "undesirable". In 1940, the programme was institutionalised with the establishment of the Reich Commission for the Scientific Analysis of Serious Hereditary and Congenital Diseases, which decided whether a sick child would live or be euthanised. Sick and handicapped children were sent to special centres, one of which was a hospital in Lubliniec.[12]

Dziewit-Meller's attempt to fill in the empty places of "memory shot through with bullets" opens with a bracket of contemporary times, in which the main character, Sebastian Kowolik, a well-to-do Silesian who runs his own hospital pharmacy, has just become a father. With the birth of his daughter, Małgosia, Sebastian's peaceful everyday life is disturbed by a strong, even para-

[11] J. Mikulski, *Medycyna hitlerowska w służbie III Rzeszy*, Warsaw 1981, p. 37.

[12] See: S. Serkowicz, *op.cit*., J. Mikulski*, op. cit*.

noid fear for the child's life. His obsession deepens when he learns that the hospital, a place which for years has been for him an object of sexual fantasies about shapely nurses and a synonym for recovered physicality, suddenly turns out to be part of the hellish Lubliniec facility for children as part of *Aktion T4*. That crime is all the more heart-breaking for him because he himself, as a pharmacy owner, is involved with the healthcare system: "Sebastian likes his work because he feels he is part of that community whose work has a profound social sense. He treats people, he saves lives, he does not create unnecessary entities – that is how he thinks about himself..."[13] However, faith in the salvific power of medical science, which until now has accompanied Sebastian, is gradually being undermined. The first alarming signal comes when the doctor suggests a caesarean section to his pregnant wife. At the time, Sebastian assuages Karolina's doubts as follows: "'Well, the doctor said so.' Sebastian firmly believes that. Who to trust, if not the healthcare system?"[14] When it turns out that the procedure was unnecessary, doubts arise. In the second case, Sebastian loses faith in the missionary power of healthcare when, after several months, little Małgosia's parents are forced to bring their daughter to hospital.

> A children's hospital, a place full of undeserved misery. Mothers and fathers, lying on the ground, on inflatable mattresses and thin foam pads, unwashed and distressed, slinking along the walls like shadows, so as not to be noticed by the all-powerful gaze of the staff. But what else can they do if the child is so young and doesn't want to understand that it would be better for the nurse if he or she stayed there alone, without the hysterical mother wandering around stealthily.[15]

What shocks the hero, however, is the crime committed against two hundred defenceless children, which took place in the Lubliniec hospital. Although the knowledge about it is not precisely concealed, the protagonist extracts it by force. It is only when he meets an elderly teacher – a father, who himself experienced the loss of his child – that Sebastian can come closer to the memory of what happened. Fear and understanding comes at the moment of identification, when what is abstract and forgotten becomes his, i.e. close and personal.

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[13] A. Dziewit-Meller, *op. cit*., p. 12.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 7.

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 17. Hospital reality is, in this case, one of the many social comments that we find in the book. In this case, it is an appeal for adequate conditions for hospitalised children and their parents, which, unfortunately, is still not the standard in Polish hospitals.

> He wonders why it hits him so hard, this knowledge that the place where he works today used to be a site of execution. And that in the old brick pavilion at the back of the hospital, now being converted into a hotel, dying children once laid on cold stone floors. And again, an uninvited lightning comes, pierces his brain with an electric impulse and lightens up in his head – because here, on the dirty stone floor, his daughter lies, in torn clothes, screaming out of fear, cold and pain. She can't get up and run away by herself yet, she only turns from her back to her stomach and back again, her eyes filled with animal-like terror, pushed to act by her survival instinct. He wants to run up to her and take her in his arms, warm her with his body, his breath, calm her down, feed her, but the closer he wants to get, the further away she goes, as if some secret force pushed her into the never-ending hospital corridor, which Sebastian has walked so many times, tapping the soles of his shoes against the cold floorboards. He wakes up screaming.[16]

The nightmares that haunt Sebastian are filled with shame for the lack of empathy and the evils of this world aimed against the smallest and most defenceless. In the history of the city, the memory of children systematically killed with Luminal remains at the far end of commercial needs, historical duties and human conscience. "A person must have a grave with their name on it," says Zgierski, the teacher, during a conversation with the Mayor. "Not a monument, not a mass grave where they are buried anonymously, as if they had never existed. A person must be given the dignity they were deprived of before their death. Let us give these children their names". In response to his request, the official inundates him with words:

> Ah, Mr Zgierski, well, it is not that simple, it is not our area, it is not our business, it is not possible, it is not appropriate, the private investor, former owners, reprivatisation, claims, damages, a mountain of money, city investments, budget support, the Institute of National Remembrance, serious heroes, accursed soldiers, the Home Army and the anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising. Crazies, minors, might not be good for the city, there is going to be a SPA, the clients (also from Germany!), negative image, cash outflow. Property taxes, various obligations, local government elections, promises. We look into the future, we do not look back, the skeletons in the closets. There are important graves and there are less important graves. Right of state, weighing the pros and cons. Social conflicts, dissatisfaction of influential groups, unnecessary

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 23.

> reopening long healed wounds. In addition, there is a lack of funds, this year has been frozen for a long time, and the new one is still a mystery. A visit from the head of the province, EU subsidies, fiscal control. Food in canteens, living children, today's children, our children. Unemployment, the Coal Company, protests. This is a marginal issue, however, try with the civic budget, although there are speed bumps on the roadways and the paver stones in the square, and flowers for the city's flower beds and the black sausage festival in August.[17]

In Sebastian's consciousness, intergenerational fears are transmitted and the traumas of the past are combined with those of the present, the familiar becomes global. Dreams of war overlap with images of drunken mothers, molested and abandoned children, the wartime tragedies of children in Syria or Iraq, and the bodies of small refugees washed away on the Mediterranean shore. When he tries to find out more about what happened in the Lubliniec hospital, he hears: "'That's abstraction, Sebek,' adds Mirka, who also knows something about that from her grandmother. 'This is a complete abstraction for me. No use getting upset by such stories if there are even worse around you every day."[18] But he "knows, he feels that it is not an abstraction at all. After all, Sebastian is afraid that one day, together with the gas bill and the Lidl supermarket advertisement, he might find a leaflet on how to behave when the war comes in the mailbox. After all, why not? They are already distributing those in Vilnius."[19] His maturity involves the acceptance that the present is always a reminder of the past, a warning that must not be underestimated.

What Sebastian shares with the central character of the following story is shame and fear, although in the context of her biography these concepts take on completely different meanings. The protagonist, Gertrude Luben, who was visited by a German journalist several decades after the war, is based on Elisabeth Hecker. In 1942–44, together with Ernest Buchalik, she ran a psychiatric hospital in Lubliniec and was responsible for selecting children for the so-called B Ward, where they were killed with regular doses of Luminal. Today, Luben is a valued, respected and distinguished professor of child psychiatry and nobody wants to remember her hospital "mission". Officially acquitted, she does not feel culpable. As she puts it, "We were only scientists, our role was and is to transcend the borders of the unknown for the sake of humanity. A scientist must always move

[17] *Ibidem*, p. 39.
[18] *Ibidem*, p. 26.
[19] *Ibidem*.

forward."[20] She explains the crimes committed against children by the rational logic of medicine, which, however, does not withstand the confrontation the real response – the response of her body. Pressed by subsequent questions, Luben vomits and sweats, and her sweat smells of fear. She knows that fear – that is how children used to smell when she leaned over and injected them with another lethal dose of Luminal. Just like Sebastian, the body of the characters is the most important medium of memory. It cannot be deceived. Luben, who explains her actions during the war by the need to perform her duties, without any moral reflection on what was being done, effectively denied the crimes she committed.[21] "'I have not dreamt of anything for years. And I am very happy about that. Great nothingness. A small death.'"[22] What is noteworthy in her first-person narrative, however, is not just her body language but also childhood memories, including a strict upbringing in a rich house full of physical, cold violence on the part of parents. "It was a different time," comments the heroine. "I am not complaining. We were brought up to be decent people. And tough people. Weak ones would not have survived all that happened afterwards.'"[23] Therefore, is Luben, once a murderess in a doctors uniform and now a lover of classical music, a product of Prussian discipline? The author often introduces us into the sphere of moral dilemmas, also in this case, seemingly without any doubts as to the moral assessment of Luben's conduct. This discourse is perfectly reflected not only in the monologue form of this chapter, in which what is being thought escapes from underneath what is being said. Dziewit-Meller introduces the theme of settling accounts with the past in the form of a journalist who asks the doctor the already famous question: *How have you been the doing?* This is a reference to the masterpiece of non-fiction literature by Krzysztof Kąkolewski, *Co u pana słychać?* [How have you been the doing?]. Thirteen after the war, Kąkolewski found and interrogated ten Germans responsible for the Nazi crimes, who had not been brought to justice and who, like Luben, were respected members of society after the war. He asked each one of them the

[20] *Ibidem*, p. 58.

[21] One of the last statements made by K. Brandt, who was responsible for the euthanasia programme, before the announcement of the Military Court's judgment, was: "It is immaterial for the experiment whether it is done with or against the will of the person concerned... The meaning is the motive – devotion to the community... Ethics of every form are decided by an order or obedience"; cited in: V. Spitz, *Doctors from Hell: The Horrific Account of Nazi Experiments on Humans*, Boulder 2005, p. 258.

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 64.

[23] *Ibidem*, p. 45.

same question that made the heroine so angry. By initiating a conversation with Dr. Luben, the author unveils and fills with dilemmas such area of "memory shot through with bullets" which speaks of guilt that has become blurred and punishment that has never been adequate, and whose memory pulsates under the skin. This phrase also touches on the tragedy resulting from the tension "between a being reduced to a suffering, chafing body wrapped in a minimal layer of self-reflection, and the pure, discursive rationality of the medical profession, which pushes physicality away from the human being, [...]."[24] Such tension cannot be relieved permanently. That is why in the memory of future generations the building of the hospital in Lubliniec will remain as a centre of euthanasia horror, and at the same time, as a hospital, it will be associated with a place of hope that people can be freed from their physical afflictions.

While in the chapter *Gertruda* the reader receives a psychological study of the suppression of the crime by one of the perpetrators, chapter titled *Ryszard* brings us closer to the centre of the Lubliniec tragedy. It is the story of a boy, ten-year-old Rysiu, brought to the hospital in Lubliniec by his stepfather, an SS officer, with his mother's consent. The second-person narrative tells the story of Rysiu from the viewpoint of someone who empathically penetrates the boy's emotional states and situation. The recurring phrases "you remember" evoke empty spaces, which have escaped the memory or which the boy would like to forget. It is as if using the second-person narrative, the author rejects the social strategy of suppressing that story from the posterity's consciousness. Through the narrative "you", we are gradually included in someone else's experience and it is as if we participate in it, which brings about the effect of emotional involvement, both in the mental and physical sphere of the presented space-time. Through such an approach, we learn the history of an abandoned child, his struggle with loneliness and the physical trauma of a hospital "treatment". Through Rysiu, who returns to the hospital in Lubliniec for a moment (all the more so because the narrative "you" sometimes resembles the masked "I" of a monologue), we also know how Dr. Luben qualified children for euthanasia – most often it was not even a serious illness, but so-called "social" considerations. Often, children who were simply disobedient, lively, with minor physical defects, were killed and death certificates were falsified. We also find out how little Rysiu managed to flee from the ward during bombing with the help of a nurse, who recognised a distant relative in him. The second-person

[24] P. Bravo, *op. cit.*

narrative is a multifaceted figure in this case – the protagonist is not just Rysiu, but all the children whose fate he shared during his stay in hospital. What is more, as Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik wrote, "the phrase 'you' forces the reader – even if it is only temporary and reversible – to feel an impulse for self-reference, i.e. to cross the borders between the world of the text and reality."[25] Thus, the story of Rysiu is both fictional and true, and the ethical aspect of those events acquires the power of judgement. Such moral judgment is part of all the stories in Dziewit-Meller's book. Here, the accusation of the abuse of medical ethics resonates particularly strongly – we are reminded of this by the words of the Hippocratic oath spoken in trembling voice by the doubtful nurse. However, fragments of Rysiu's story, sometimes stylised as a court trial, and equally evoking the arguments of perpetrators who escaped punishment, correspond to the accusations not only against people, but also against science, systems and institutions whose development and success have been built on the trauma of victims.

> However, Dr. Luben was not afraid of what she was supposed to fear. You see, Rysiu, she did scientific work. Everything she did, she did on behalf of science, for higher purposes and to improve the fate of humanity. See here – it was in this very room that she cut your little bodies, rigid after death. Autopsies of corpses to find out what killed you made no sense, because you were killed by someone else's hatred, but Dr. Luben would take your precious brains out of your little heads and then, immersed in formalin, in huge jars, send them all the way to Wrocław, to Professor Weizsäcker, a collector and head hunter from the Institute of Neurology. Your epilepsy, underdevelopment, antisocial behaviour, any deviation from the norm, your artistic abilities – all of this the professor drew to the light of day of science with the help of microscopes, Petri dishes, boards and diagrams. What would psychosomatic medicine be without your contribution? Where, dear Rysiu, would the world be without the sacrifice of all the victims of such numerous experiments? In just five years of the war the progress was made as if an entire era had passed. How many German medical students, at the Max Planck Institute, for example, have learnt how human body is built on human body parts collected for such purposes in camps, hospitals and God knows where. Victims' remains were used for learning years after the war, in Tübingen, Heidelberg, Vienna, where only recently

[25] M. Rembowska-Płuciennik, *O przechodzeniu na ty... narracja diadyczna* wśród literackich reprezentacji świadomości bohatera, [in:] *(W) sieci modernizmu. Historia literatury – poetyka – krytyka*, eds. A. Kluba, M. Rembowska-Płuciennik, Warszawa 2017, p. 253.

> it has been admitted that the brains of four hundred Holocaust victims are still stored at the Institute of Neurobiology. Ah, Rysiu, if it had not been for that war, where would IBM, Bauer and Volkswagen be today, where would IG Farben be, where would Audi, Krupp and Deutsche Bahn be? (When you, Rysiu, were not yet even planned, and your mother had only just welcomed your eldest sister, Marysia, Willy Heidinger, head of IBM's German subsidiary, gave a wonderful speech at the opening of the company's factory, in which he spoke with incredible, contagious enthusiasm about the excellent prospects that IBM technology offers for the biological future of the German people – population statistics is a reliable method of eliminating unhealthy, inferior elements from German society.[26]

The little boy who managed to avoid the tragic fate of his peers grew up in a foster home, became a miner and started a family. And as the narrator writes, employing Silesian dialect:

> You never said anything to yer bairns or yer wife, nuthin' t' talk 'bout, b'gones are b'gones. No use blabberin', yesterday is yesterday, t'day is t'day and tha'sit. Sometimes you are just as surprised yourself that ye're not back in that hospital wi' th' loonies, because sometimes you are reminded of all that, the images come, and then something tenses in your gut and you feel like your head is about to break. Then you press your fingers into the table top or backrest of the chair and hold on, as if you were afraid that if you let go, you might fall back into that well with no bottom, from which so many never came out. But you did come out. You and a few more.[27]

Trauma, trivialised and pushed into oblivion, also in this case speaks through the body that never forgets. Again, the author poses the question – why does the father and grandfather never speak to his loved ones about his past? Why it was only in the 1960s that Jerzy Redlich, who was the prototype of the character of Rysiu, decided to tell us in *Trybuna Ludu* daily what had happened in the hospital in Lubliniec?[28] The author uses these source texts to fill in numerous holes in "memory shot through with bullets," painful enough that they are hidden even from those who are the closest to us.

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[26] A. Dziewit-Meller, *op. cit.*, p. 110–112.

[27] *Ibidem*, p. 112.

[28] https://czestochowa.wyborcza.pl/czestochowa/1,150461,20759903,mroczna-historia-szpitala.html (accessed: 7 August 2020).

One of the most dramatic, silenced stories of borderland Silesia is that of Zefka. When we meet her, she is an eighty-year-old old woman dying of cancer, visited by pregnant Karolina, the mother of little Małgosia. The women are bound by family ties and symbolic opposites. One is young, waiting for a new life, the other is saying goodbye to the world. The conversation about the past is initiated by the "presence" of the child. When Zefka touches the pregnant woman's belly, for a moment she becomes a teenager again – not yet destroyed by evil, still dreaming of a better life. "'Give the lil' un a good name,' says the aunt, who now has a habit of falling into lengthy moments of lethargy. She looks then as if she was already elsewhere. On such occasions I am afraid to look into her eyes. I smile. 'Good, meaning what?' 'Not Russky.'"[29] This scene initiates a return to the past. We get to know Aunt Zefa's life: from childhood, through adolescence and war time, which brutally forced her to grow up faster. Also in this story, Dziewit-Meller emphasises unobvious moral qualifications, both at the level of family and social life. Throughout her life, Aunt Zefa avoids answering the question of her childlessness, but her secret is the fate of many women in borderland Silesia and is linked to the mass rapes that the Russians committed during the offensive. On the night of 31 January to 1 February 1945, Wildenhagen, today's Lubin, witnessed dramatic events rarely recorded in historical chronicles. Again, Dziewit-Meller constructs the character of Zefka by mixing memory and imagination. The book follows an account of a German woman, Adelheid Nagel, who was one of the few to survive that night.[30] She was several years old at the time, a witness to the brutal mass rape of local women and girls and part of a mass suicide that was committed by German women and whole families before the Russians entered the city. On the one hand, we are therefore witnessing the drama of the raped women, the contempt and the instrumental treatment of their bodies by Soviet victors:

> When it comes to fertilisation, the gene carousel is spinning like crazy. It is impossible to judge which one has just become a dad. Maybe when the child grows up, when it turns out whether he or she has more slanted eyes or less, whether he or she is tall or short, thick or eloquent – then maybe everything will be revealed. Zefka lies in the backyard of her house, naked, in minus twenty degrees, her mother, who did not want her to come back, lies on the stairs of

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[29] A. Dziewit-Meller, *op. cit*., p. 66.

[30] This story was described by W. Nowak and A. Kuźniak in their reportage *Noc w Wildenhagen* (2000), included in the collection: W. Nowak, *Obwód głowy*, Warsaw 2015, p. 23–45.

> the house. In the basement there is a father who has been shot, who will very much want to recover from his wounds, but nobody knows how successfully. Next to him, Magda, who pissed herself in fear, and Aniela, quivering in some kind of attack.[31]

Zefka becomes pregnant but the baby dies during premature birth: "There is nothing worse than when your baby's body, still wet from your blood, grows cold on your breast."[32] On the other hand, the memory of the body that marked her fate is also linked to the tragedy of the one who survived the attempted extended suicide:

> Daughter, wife, mother, there is only one way out for us – to die by our own hand. By our gentle hand. Before we can see how hell consumes us all. Here is a rope, daughter, a rope, the same we used to hang laundry on summer days, to dry in the warm wind. Your white dresses and my black ones used to on it. Bed linen from your sisters' beds and your father's shirts, still smelling of soap. I am now clenching it around my neck, look, listen, when your mother speaks to you, look, because this is a one-time instruction, see? When you squat, this rope will tighten and you will only hear a dry crack. It's going to be that quick death that we pray for before bedtime and after waking up.[33]

Dziewit-Meller reconstructs traumatic scenes, combining historical facts with literary fiction. However, she succeeds in bringing to light something that has been ejected from public awareness. Until recently, the Germans were reluctant to admit that as a result of the collective hysteria that preceded the Red Army mothers cut their daughters' veins, hanged them and persuaded their children to commit suicide. Historians say that the women of Wildenhagen suffered the Nemmersdorf syndrome, which not long after seized the imagination of thousands of Germans. Nemmersdorf, a small village in East Prussia, today Mayakovskoye in the Kaliningrad district, fell into Russian hands as early as October 1944. The Wehrmacht took it back several hours later, but what soldiers saw surpassed their worst expectations: women with their clothes rolled up, a clear sign of rape, crucified on the barn door, the massacre of seventy-two women, children and one man, children with broken skulls and a woman with her head split with an axe or a shovel. German women became victims of Göeb-

[31] A. Dziewit-Meller, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 87.
[33] *Ibidem*, p. 83.

bels' propaganda, which depicted the Red Army as a dangerous horde, prone to extreme brutality and murder on unprecedented scale. At the same time, many historians confirm that men who hailed from the steppe peoples who served as reserve troops brutalised and raped their victims. What is more, such behaviour was even "justified": "Joseph Stalin takes a drag from his pipe and says: and what is so disgusting about a man having some fun with a woman after such horrors? You have to understand that the Red Army is not perfect. It is important that they fight the Germans – and they fight well, so nothing else matters."[34] When describing the tragedy of women, Dziewit-Meller not only evoked and condemned the rape, which has only been on the list of war crimes since 2008. She also revealed the ideological foundations behind the notion of 'Freitod' (good death), which occurred on the border between Poland and Germany.

One of the crucial features of the events described above are the unobvious qualifications and identity shifts characteristic of Silesia residents. When little Zefka goes to Germany to work, she does not expect to find there a home and a mother who would love her more than her biological one, although of course she is not aware that *Lebensborn* plays out in the background. In her eyes, Germany is an idyllic, fairy-tale land, filled with kindness and unconditional parental love she does not know from her own home. "And what did ye come back for? Nobody call'd ye here,' says the mother when she sees her daughter back at the threshold of the family home. Years later, Zefka's foster brother, Karlchen, arrives at her funeral and brings with him a handful of soil that he throws into her grave with words: "She wanted to be buried in our soil. That is all I could do for her."[35] By employing the micrological perspective, the author nullifies simple antinomial qualifications: good-wrong, family-foreign, self-existent. This identity rioting affects the inhabitants of Silesia many times. When the offensive approaches, Zefka's father does not decide to run away, saying:

> 'And where is we t' go? We is fro' here! And we is no Germans, we is Silesians, fer fooksake, quit yer blatherin', lassies, ask me no more or ah'll smack yer,' father says and goes outside to the yard to watch what is happening. The children, who have been learning Ich bin klein, mein Herz is rein[7] since they were little, diligently repeat 'Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here,' try to remember counting to a hundred and Polish

[34] *Ibidem*. The quoted excerpt is a fictionalised version of J. Stalin's statement in talks with M. Jilas in 1962. See: W. Nowak, *op.cit.*, p. 39–40.

[35] A. Dziewit-Meller, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

> declination. Teach your child the language in three days, go on. It's a pity that nothing can be burned here, burn that the gurgling speech out of their throats once and for all. 'First they beat us fer speakin' Polish, now they is gonna beat us fer German!' whines some bairn bawlin' in the square.[36]

Alfons, Zefka's brother, first forcibly conscripted into the Wehrmacht, returns home, but is immediately taken by the NKVD and conscripted into the camp in Łambinowice, where the existing infrastructure built by the Germans is used for the brutal "re-education" of Silesians. He returns ten months later, on the verge of exhaustion: "After a week, Alfons sits on his bed. Next to him sits a skinny Zefka, who immediately jumped out of the chair and calls out to her family. 'Lassie, what 'ave they done t' ye!' Alfons looks into his sister's eyes, and she notes with horror that her brother's gaze is empty, as if there was nothing left in him except the desire for revenge."[37]

The fluid identity, which the author emphasises through the ambiguous fate of her characters, is also manifested in language. For it is in this chapter that the question of who the Silesians are and what historical legacy the inhabitants of the region have come to face is particularly clear. Dziewit-Meller stresses such identity (non)attachment in the language, because it is the language that is the source of self-knowledge – the Silesian dialect defines the characters and best expresses their original feelings and fears. Language – also treated as an element of bodily experience – best reflects the pain and experience deeply hidden in individual and intergenerational memory. The fact that Zefka wanted to be buried in German soil does not complicate anything, but rather highlights that there is no need for unambiguous qualifications.

Similarly ambiguous assessments are generated in the last chapter of the book, which, like a bracket, closes the stories linked through the tragedy of the war trauma and the awareness that brutality against the weakest is judged with particular severity. What about little Hitler saved from drowning by a friend? Is the curse that an organist from Passau throws against the priest that rescued Hitler from the river years earlier excusable? If Johann Kuehberg had known how his act of courage would change the world, would he have done it? Of course, the author asks us this question and never answers it directly. The latter can only be gleaned, as in this case, from paratexual suggestions. Why is the name of Rysiu written like the name of an adult even though the character is

[36] *Ibidem*, p. 81.
[37] *Ibidem*, p. 89.

a child, while little Adolf remains Adik? It seems that this is deliberate on the part of the author, for every adult, even Hitler – she seems to be saying – was once someone else's child, just as Adik was Klara's beloved son. Not without a reason, it is his theme that both opens and closes the book. It is related to the already-cited "perhaps" – if Hitler had drowned, "perhaps" there would have been no Auschwitz, no crematoria... The act of criminal euthanasia of children would not have had to happen. Perhaps. This conditional form is also a certain ethical suggestion. The past, if we know it, can be a source of knowledge and a lesson for the future. But only if we see people in history as flesh and bone – as the author does by building a micrology of characters by giving them (eponymous) names and emphasising their physical and sensual condition vulnerable to injury. Human ignorance, lack of imagination and empathy, followed by violence, starts when we stop seeing the other as a human being. When humanity is replaced by an idea, science and politics, Sebastian, Zefka and Rysiu disappear from sight. This is when the time of great History begins, when carnality and medicine break off from the chain of moral constraints. The author, granddaughter of doctors, admits that such kind of betrayal of the doctor's ethos and abuse of the Hippocratic oath seemed unfathomable to her.[38] However, she is capable of more than simple condemnation and brings us into the sphere of ethical dilemmas, which are the greatest strength of this book. As one critic writes, "somewhere in the area of this rationality, which makes one's body foreign in order to be able to control its illness and deterioration, there is a line that divides the doctor from the torturer. A line, by the way, which is completely conventional and cannot be drawn once and for all."[39] The same convention and ironic view of reality dynamise the plot and the moral message of the story: the father, who takes over the cultural role attributed to mothers in the atavistic fear for the child's life; the mother who does not show any feelings to her daughter, but who, watching a propaganda film, feels an inner opposition to the so-called "good death"; the girl who accepts a child conceived out of rape; forced labour as an Arcadian home experience; grotesque figures of dolls making decisions about the life and death of others; Nuremberg – the city of toys and the Military Tribunal for Nazi criminals. This ironic reversal is a peculiar anomaly of discourse, an element of an ethically motivated literary strategy, which avoids pure facts and literalism by negating unambiguous qualifications: identity, moral, but also those resulting from reading experience. As

[38] *Ibidem*, p. 131.
[39] P. Bravo, *op. cit.*

Michał Paweł Markowski wrote, literature understood in such a way "makes us aware, in a unique and revealing way, of the nature of our obligations towards reality and broadens our social sensitivity."[40] Filling in the blank spaces of the "memory shot through with bullets"' is one of the most important elements of that reading strategy.

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