

The Bulwark against Trauma: Poetry as a Means of Survival in Totalitarian Prisons

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ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses the specific function of poetry written by the prisoners in Nazi and Communist prisons and concentration, correctional and labour camps. These people wrote poetry for various reasons – e.g. internal and pragmatic – to survive the difficult situation they found themselves in. Surveying the texts written by the prisoners over the scope of more than 50 years, the specific phenomenon of poetry as a spiritual defence, a survival tool and bulwark against trauma becomes more and more apparent. Highlighting a rather marginal position of the prison and camp poetry within the confines of the contemporary literary studies, the paper attempts to explain the causes of this neglect. It therefore focuses on the very act of literary creation in the sense of manifestation of inner freedom and inner emancipation, rather than on interpretation of individual texts and critically assessing the literary values of the prison and camp poetry. The texts are viewed from other angles as well, e.g. psychological, social, and cultural.

1.

Contemporary literary studies is predominantly interested in the issue of artistic, or rather fictional *representation* or *reflection* of trauma, especially the one of the Holocaust; and literature *inspired by* the Shoah, literary *images* of the Shoah and

literature with the *subject matter* of the Holocaust (in Czech literary studies see HOLÝ 2007, 2011, 2012ab). If we make rather provocative simplification, we can say that nowadays we are much more concerned with poetry and literary works *after* Auschwitz, whereas poetry from Auschwitz and other camps and gulags or poetry written in Czechoslovak prisons and labour camps, e.g. from the 1950s but also the 1980s,¹ has still not been adequately researched. Sandra Alferts also noticed this surprising fact in her study *Zapomenuté verše (Vergessene Verse, 2004)*:

[A]ll the numerous poems, written in Terezín and other concentration camps during the Third Empire become the research topic of German literary science only at an inadequate rate, if at all. Even though there is no shortage of texts in the vast area of literature about the Holocaust and intellectuals eagerly deal with all aspects of memoir literature, the poetic renderings of the Holocaust have been consigned to oblivion, with only a few exceptions, and have remained on the 'literary periphery' as Ludvík Václavěk pointed out in 1994 [...] Taking into consideration the number of scientific treatises, it is really strange that attempts to describe labour camp poetry have been scarce. [...] we are completely missing literary analyzes of poems which originated 'inside' concentration camps. (ALFERTS 2004: 119–120)

Not surprisingly, Andrés Nader's monograph *Traumatic Verses. On Poetry in German from Concentration Camps 1933–1945* (2007) was praised for filling the gap significantly; previously, Frieda W. Aaron's work *Bearing the Unbearable. Yiddish and Polish Poetry in the Ghettos and Concentration Camps* (1990) was accepted in a similar way.

However, over the last two decades "Holocaust poetry", i.e. poetry drawing on the authentic Holocaust experience, has been placed among serious topics of scientific research on the worldwide scale; yet these days it is most frequently understood as latter post-war production rather than as literary production anchored directly in the space and time of the Second World War camps and prisons. In their 2008 introduction to the special issue of *Critical Survey* on Holocaust poetry, the editors Rowland and Eaglestone inquired after a possible reason of Holocaust poetry being under-researched or even ignored by academic criticism for such a long time. Referring to Susan's Gubar study *Poetry after Auschwitz* they speculated that the reason might be that rather than

1) These examples could be further extended. An interesting probe into the prison / labour camp literature in East European countries under socialist dictatorship was presented by Harold B. Segel in his anthology *The Walls Behind the Curtain. East European Prison Literature 1945–1990* (2012).

studying poetic works, the critics preferred to focus on more sophisticated prosaic works by Levi, Borowski etc. one possible reason for this preference being a certain “disregard for poetry” of the contemporary academic community.² Scientific reflections on labour camp poetry were limited to generalizing statements about the aesthetic inadequacy of this production, which cannot begin to portray the Holocaust experience being directly confronted with it (ALFERS 2004).³ Thus, prose is now regarded as the representative form for thematizing to the Holocaust (VICE 2008). The authors of the foreword, in accordance with Susan Gubar, have further pointed out that Adorno’s famous statement (writing poems after Auschwitz is barbaric) meant that such poetry really became a taboo for substantial time. (ROWLAND – EAGLESTONE 2008: 1) “Adorno believes that it is virtually impossible socially for an individual to verbally react to the devastating reality of the dehumanized world” (HOLÝ 2011: 171). However, at this point it must be mentioned that the interpretation of Adorno’s dictum is usually rather exaggerated: “Adorno’s aim was definitely not to deny the right to exist to the literature after Auschwitz, as the widespread trivialization of his sentence seems to suggest” (KAIBACH 2007: 171). Adorno primarily feared the aestheticization of suffering. Nevertheless, Adorno was opposed by many Holocaust survivors: “I do not agree with Adorno! I think this is nonsense because the existence of poetry cannot be ended by a tragedy; on the contrary: every tragic event increases the ‘need’ of poetry” (BONDYOVÁ 2004: 70). At the present time, there is a growing interest in Holocaust poetry. However, according to Rowland and Eaglestone, new tools for its research have not been created. Instead, the concepts and vocabulary from other branches of “Holocaust studies” are being applied.⁴ The development of the attitude towards Holocaust poetry

- 2) Nevertheless, in the past researches, especially from the Anglo-American area, faced the shortage of translations of labour camp poetry. Therefore such great attention was paid to the prosaic work by Borowski and others – their translations into English existed.
- 3) “In the direct comparison with Paul Celan’s experimental, fragmentary and often linguistically encoded poems about the Holocaust, it is almost always pointed out that the often traditionally rendered works by concentration camp prisoners were “clumsy” as far as the form is concerned, e.g. not precise and rhythmic verses. Thus, the artistic inferiority of these works is emphasized. This opinion, based solely on the criteria of aesthetic evaluation, is often based on the assumption that poetry cannot adequately describe the Holocaust events. Therefore, existing attempts at literary interpretation, which would adequately analyze the concentration camp poetry, have been failing. [...] For the general understanding of these texts we have to consider the historical, psychological and sociological aspects of their origin and to clarify the *in extremis* background from which they originated” (ALFERS 2004: 120). Tomáš Glanc writes about poetry from Gulag in a similar way: “The literary values are confronted here with a completely different set of criteria, with the pressure of monstrous circumstances which make us rethink what can be poetry and what its meanings are composed of” (GLANC 2004: 248). However, the actual process of writing prison/camp poetry and its importance is not usually reflected by the literary studies.
- 4) For example postmemory writing (Marianne Hirsch), secondary witnessing (Dominick LaCapra), proxy-witnessing

is also closely connected to the wider acceptance of the Holocaust in history – from silence, followed by the thesis about the singularity of the Holocaust, to the massive growth of recollection and later to proxy-witnessing (ROWLAND – EAGLESTONE 2008: 2). This conception resembles Aleida Assman's four-stage model; she characterizes the post-war coping with traumatic events in four stages: “dialogic forgetting” and making “a pact of silence”, followed by a period of “remembering in order to never forget”, and later “remembering in order to forget”, leading up to “dialogic remembering” of today (ASSMANN 2010). Similarly, various anthologies of Holocaust poetry have emerged both at the level of individual national literatures and in international selections since the 1990s.⁵ The most recent approaches do not talk about Holocaust poetry only but also about post-Holocaust poetry, i.e. poetry about the Holocaust written by those who did not experience this trauma themselves. Scholars try to question the frequently quoted Adorno's statement and emphasize that non-authentic post-Holocaust poetry, i.e. poetry based on a different kind of poetics, has its own value as a specific form representing the Holocaust (see ROWLAND 2006, VICE 2006). In the new millennium we can thus encounter a collection called *Requiem. Poems of the Terezín Ghetto* (2011) by Paul B. Janeczko, an American teacher and poet. On the basis of historical research, Janeczko composed about thirty poems so that they would truly reflect the life in the ghetto and bring it closer to adolescent readers – the collection's intended audience. Its fictional poetic texts are accompanied by original children's drawings from Terezín.

In the academia there is an ongoing surge of reflection on literature about trauma (mainly about the Holocaust) which constantly begs new questions – about the influence of literature on the cultural memory, the relation between literature and trauma, “second generation voices” (reflections of generations after the Holocaust), the possibility to be silent about the Holocaust, the relation between the truth and literariness and what is allowed in the fictional world with the Holocaust topic – using humour, the perspective of culprits etc. Though inspirational, these questions do not belong into, regardless of the fact that the current “amount of studies dealing with artistic and specifically literary reflection of the Holocaust is virtually countless” (HOLÝ 2007:10).

(Robert Jay Lifton and Susan Gubar) etc.

5) See e.g. SCHIFF 1995, KRAMER 1998; Holocaust poetry have also been published and made accessible on the internet – e.g. <http://poetryinhell.org/>, <http://www.yiddishpoetry.org/>; for German anthologies see e.g. ALFERS 2004: 133. We can also mention recently published anthologies and readers of poetry from Soviet labour camps and communist prisons – e.g. VILENSKIJ 2005, DOBIÁŠ 2009, SEGEL 2012.

2.

After 1945 numerous anthologies (e.g. BART 1945; BENEŠ 1946) and collections of prison and camp labour poetry from the World War Two were published in Czechoslovakia, mainly by Czech prisoners of non-Jewish origin.⁶ Surprisingly even at that time some literary critics complained about this kind of poetry being neglected, e.g. in 1947 the left-wing literary critic Václav Běhounek wrote in his article *Naše vězeňská literatura* [Our Prison Literature] in the journal *Kytice* [Bouquet]: “Finally, I have to say a few words about *prison poetry*. This kind of poetry has also been denied its rights several times. Once again, it is absolutely wrong” (BĚHOUNEK 1947: 394). Afterwards, any further interest ceased – the readership started to be tired by the “flood” of prison literature of various quality and also the Communist (anti-semitic) regime did not welcome the commemoration of the Holocaust events; imprisonment in Nazi prisons was usually commemorated only as a part of Communist propaganda. Not even later was the interest in authentic Holocaust poetry restored – e.g. in the 1960s, when interest in the Shoah and concentration camp experience was brought back to life, or even in the 1980s and 90s, when there was another surge of interest in the Holocaust (HOLÝ 2011); the priority in literature was given to documentary prose and fictional prosaic rendering of the camp experience and ensuing interpretation and research. Similarly, prison poetry from the 1950s Communist labour camps and prisons (but also from later years) has not been thoroughly and comprehensively mapped by the Czech literary science. In 1975 it was only Antonín Kratochvíl who pointed at “one literary-historical phenomenon to which no (or almost no) attention has been paid so far: how literature and mainly poetry was written and spread behind the bars of Communist concentration camps in the 1950s and in later years” (KRATOCHVIL 1975: 15). Four decades later this debt remains unpaid. While there is noticeable amount of scholarly attention aimed at prison texts written by Jan Zahradníček, Václav Renč, Ivan Martin Jirous et al., these studies are devoted predominantly to individual authors or works, they do not look for wider connections or describe further meanings and functions of crea-

6) More profound interest in works by Czechoslovak Jews written in German would be probably unthinkable at that time. The status of returned Jews was rather complicated in post-war Czechoslovakia. As Lisa Peschel pointed out, they were returning into a completely different society; however, it was a society they wanted to belong to, therefore they adjusted to all its demands (a deviation from German-speaking culture, a tendency towards left-wing thinking), which was projected also into their literary testimonies, “memoirs became a stage where the authors demonstrated their undoubted identity which Czechs could accept again. [...] Memoirs, and especially their parts depicting the cultural life in the ghetto, became a means of legitimizing authors as members of the post-war society” (PESCHEL 2010: 446).

tive activity in prison. One reason might be the insufficient amount of original documents, which will be discussed later. The problem which remains in the Czech literary studies seems to be similar to Russian labour camp literature as it was characterized by Italian literary scholar Andrea Gullotta. The authors of Russian labour camp literature are usually studied separately, piece by piece; nobody, with a few minor exceptions such as the exceptional analytical work *Return from the Archipelago* by Leona Toker, has studied the labour camp literature as a literary phenomenon in itself, as a generic version (GULOTTA 2001: 95)⁷, in the same way we legitimately start to discuss the genre of concentration camp poetry. It must be added that further unexplored issues are entirely left out – poetic works of Czech citizens in Gulag (see POLÁK 1955) or in refugee camps abroad; the poetry of British war exile, including works of local Czechoslovak soldiers, was at least partially described by Michal Jareš (2007).

I now wish to turn back to further reasons of indifference or rather of the selective attitude of research on cultural life in totalitarian camps and prisons. First, we cannot fully know and collect the entire production; second, the works preserved are not easily accessible and often scattered in archives, family estate, bibliophile or samizdat editions etc. For example, from the period of Nazi totalitarianism there are well-covered topics of music (e.g. VRKOČOVÁ 1981; PEDUZZI 1999; KUNA 2000; GILBERT 2005; *Terezín Music Foundation*), theatre and cabaret (e.g. ŠORMOVÁ 1973; PESCHEL 2009ab) and education (KASPEROVÁ 2011) in Terezín ghetto and other places. It is known that in Terezín a children's opera called *Brundibár* [The Bumblebee] was performed, children in Terezín secretly issued magazine *Vedem* [Forward] and other periodicals (some of them are accessible online at <http://www.vedem-Terezin.cz/>), children's diaries are also known etc. Why do researchers focus exclusively on these creative activities and neglect others – especially labour camp and prison poetry (with the exception of AARON /1990/, ADLER /2006/, NADER /2007/ or the rather well-covered topic of poetry written by children and adolescents /FRANKOVÁ –

7) The term “labour camp literature”, its conception as an independent genre and its definition has raised various terminological questions. Andrea Gullotta prefers the usage of a wider term *literatura sovjetskoi travmy*, or *literatura sovjetskoi represii* (*Soviet repression literature*), instead of the term *lagernaja literatura* (*labour camp literature*). In his view, this umbrella term would enable us to include “all literary works that dealt with Soviet repression and with the traumas created as a consequence” (GULOTTA 2011: 95–96). In this genre Gullotta places sub-genres such as “labour camp memoirs” (*lagernaia memuaristika* – *Gulag memoirs*; with a specific category of “female labour camp memoirs” *zhenskaia lagernaia memuaristika*), “labour camp poetry” (*lagernaia poezii* – *Gulag poetry*), but also works which he calls “fictional prose about Soviet repression” (*khudozhestvennaia proza o sovjetskoi represii* – *Soviet repression fiction*), etc. (GULOTTA 2012: 75) Similarly, Simeon Vilensky brings a superordinate term *literatura odporu*, where “[in] its labour camp part there prevail memoirs, letters, the combination of documentary prose and fiction” (VILENSKY 2013: 8).

POVOLNÁ 1993; KŘÍŽKOVÁ – KOTOUAČ – ORNEST 1995; MAKAROVA 2009)? One of the answers to this question appears to be easier than it might seem at first sight. Theatre performances or concerts are *collective* events – they are performed by a group of people (actors, orchestra members and others), their audience in ghettos or camps used to be numerous. Although just dozens out of the hundreds or thousands of participants and witnesses survived, these survivors could testify to the collective cultural experiences. At the same time, records about these events were documented in detail for Nazis. In this respect, poetic production has a certain “disadvantage” – it is closely connected with an *individual* and certain intimacy, and it does not belong in front of a bigger audience. Only the authors themselves, or a close circle of fellow prisoners, knew about the poems which were composed in their minds, often without the possibility of actually writing them down. The concept of a reader completely vanished. There is a fundamental difference between being imprisoned in a ‘regular’ prison where prisoners could spend days and months in solitary confinement (hence the term prison poetry) and camps where they were gathered in collective quarters or barracks (hence the term camp poetry) and could at least to some extent get together and share literary works. Still, if the prisoners had not been successful in storing the poems in their memory for the whole duration of imprisonment (e.g. Rajmund Habřina during the Nazi imprisonment, Jan Zahradníček or Jiří Hejda in the 1950s); if the poems had not been rewritten directly in prisons and bound into small books in the form of a prison or camp samizdat (e.g. books of verses bound and illustrated by women in the concentration camp in Ravensbrück,⁸ or one version of Čapek’s concentration poems or the collection *Přádénko z drátů* [Wire Skein] and other books of imprisoned scouts in Rovnost camp at the beginning of the 1950s); if the poems had not been written down and smuggled out of the prison in a secret message (such as Zdeněk Rotrekl’s collection *Malachit* [Malachite]) or through visitors or a lenient prison guard; if they had not been hidden till the release from prison or liberation (e.g. as the priest Jindřich Jenáček wrote his poems on cigarette papers bound with a thread); if they had not been preserved in the memories of inmates (such as Václav Renč’s *Popelka nazaretská*

8) The literary production and publishing practice of women in Ravensbrück deserves a separate study. With a fair amount of courage and persistence, they managed to publish about 70–80 books in the camp, many of them contained original illustrations. Perhaps the best name of this “game of books” which took place in the camp was coined by its direct participant Anička Kvapilová (2004); for more about her, see VOLKOVÁ 2012. The community of imprisoned women in the female prison in Waldheim during the Second World was vividly portrayed by Milada Marešová: “Bářinka left and there is quiet Mařenka next to me but we talk as well. She recites poems in a whisper, those she knows from youthful years and those she learnt here from Bářinka and others; we like our Czech poems, they comfort us. They are handed down on small pieces of paper and we learn them by heart” (MAREŠOVÁ 2009: 112).

[The Cinderella of Nazareth] with 291 stanzas and 1600 verses which “[h]undreds and hundreds of inmates [...] knew either partially or completely by heart; it had circulated in countless copies (variously distorted) around the world long before I returned home.” /a letter from Václav Renč to Jaroslav Med, 23 October 1970/); if they had not been hidden in secret hiding places (such as Ilse Weber’s poems buried in Terezín ghetto by her husband-gardener and collected after the war), they would have been lost once and for all. Jicchak Arad commented on creative writing in Treblinka:

In the extermination camp Treblinka there was a dentist (his name is unknown) who wrote down what had happened every day. He also composed poetry and recited some of his works to friends. Works composed in Treblinka have not been found; either they got lost or they were destroyed during the demolition of the camp. It is probable that there were more prisoners who wrote in camps; however, their works have not been mentioned by witnesses and have not been discovered either.⁹ (ARAD 2006: 245)

Similarly, Anička Kvapilová, one of the women imprisoned in Ravensbrück described the complicated fate of local literary production shortly after her return from the concentration camp: “Only a tiny fraction of all the books got home with us. A lot of them were intentionally destroyed for fear of ruthless searches and cruel punishments. The first books from 1942 and 1943 embarked on a long journey – they were hidden in the most impossible places under the floor, in the central heating boilers or even in the cages of Angora rabbits. In the end, they were secretly sent home and got lost along the way” (KVAPILOVÁ 2004: 311). The fate of poetry written in the Czechoslovak Communist labour camps and prisons of the 1950s was similar. Some of it was destroyed by the prison guards (e.g. Nina Svobodová’s prison poems), some was lost during escorts (e.g. Zdeněk Kalista’s poems) or during the attempts to smuggle the pages to the family (this happened to the author of the anthology of Slovak prison poetry Rudolf Dobiáš who tried to send home his secretly written collection *Akvárium* [Aquarium] via a civilian employee. However, for unknown reasons it had never been delivered and the poems had not stuck in the author’s memory). Whether for political reasons, when the authors of labour camp and

9) Identical situation is described by Solzhenitsyn: “How many similar writers were in the Archipelago at that time? I believe that many more than it had turned out over the years. Not all of them were destined to survive and their work perished with them. Someone buried a bottle with sheets of paper but did not say anyone where it was. Someone gave these sheets to another person to keep them safe but they got into careless or too cautious hands” (SOLZHENITSYN 2011: 99).

prison poetry were silenced and were not able to publish their work, or because of the lack of interest of both the public and experts, or simply because of the modesty and shyness of amateur authors who did not have the courage to ever show someone their prison poems, often the only ones they have ever written, we will never be able to read these poems.

Furthermore, it must be noted that researches studying the poetic production of Russian labour camps faced identical problems. An association of former labour camp prisoners called *Vozvrashcheniye* (Возвращение, 'Return'), founded by a former political prisoner Simeon Vilensky, started to map the (not only) poetic production after many decades; since the beginning of the 1990s these poems have been published in edition series *Poety – uzniki GULAGa. Malaya Seriya* (Поэты-узники ГУЛАГа. Малая серия, Poets – GULAG prisoners. Small series). In 2005 Vilensky was able to edit an extensive anthology *Poeziya uznikov GULAGa* (Поэзия узников ГУЛАГа, Poetry of GULAG Prisoners). "The fact that we have published more than one hundred completely unknown authors – former Gulag prisoners, who would have remained unknown had they not been discovered by us, can be regarded as our biggest success. Moreover, they are brilliant writers. Each new author was a great discovery and surprise for me. Nobody, apart from us, has been interested in this topic" (VILENSKY 2010). This can serve as very convincing evidence that the current lack of sources and insufficient research on this phenomenon does not mean that this subject is a marginal one; on the contrary, it indicates that contemporary academic discourse is rather disdainful in this respect.

3.

Many more poems than it is and will be known have been written in totalitarian camps and prisons; nevertheless, it is possible to describe the poetic production in these conditions as a both unique and universal phenomenon. The complex description of this phenomenon in various institutions and various times might seem too generalizing or simplifying which we admit (detailed research must take into consideration the actual conditions of space and time; logically, many diaries and other documents from the Nazi-enforced ghettos have been preserved, whereas direct written testimonies from concentration

camp, where prisoners fought for their lives and did not have the strength to write, are scarce (WAXMAN 2005/). Nevertheless, the prisoners faced very similar experience in all these environments: the shock of being imprisoned or of arriving at a camp, powerlessness, humiliation, the loss of dignity (being undressed, having their hair cut, being dressed in ill-fitting prison clothes), the loss of status and name (replaced by a number which was even tattooed in concentration camps), the treatment of people like mere objects, the worthlessness of human life, the necessity to submit to the prison rules, movement in limited living space, the feeling of timelessness, the presence of violence and bullying, slavish work, physical suffering, illnesses, hunger, cold, isolation from relatives and for many also the impossibility to make themselves understood because of the language barrier arising from the unknown language of jailers. As an individual is getting used to the horrifying reality, he or she becomes apathetic, starts to wither psychically, loses the value of their own self, views himself or herself as only a negligible part of a crowd, is not sure whether he or she still is a real human being and becomes “a human without a past and name”, just a step from complete apathy and submission to the destiny. At this moment, as the psychologist Viktor Frankl says, it is necessary to realize that there is always a remnant of spiritual, inner freedom which cannot be taken away even in a concentration camp. It is the free inner decision of each individual, not physical, psychological and other conditions, which determines if they remain human beings and preserve their dignity. The lack of intellectual fulfilment and hopelessness only leads to psychological and physical deterioration, and personality disintegration (FRANKL 2006). Therefore, in camps and prisons it was necessary to resist the external pressure at least “internally” – not to give up in hardship and try to “compensate for the misery of everyday physical existence by the richness of intellectual life” (MAKAROVA 2002: 6).

Despite physical deterioration, many decided to retain the mental alertness which in some cases saved their lives or helped them build an imaginary bulwark against trauma and prevented the total destruction of their identity. Composing poems became one of survival strategies in all totalitarian prisons and camps. “Shalamov wrote that amidst all the ‘delusion, evil and decay’ poetry saved him from total numbness” (APPLEBAUM 2004: 337).

The prisoners chose poetry as their creative activity for many reasons which were mutually interwoven. For example Zoë Waxman (2005) states various motivations which Jews in Warsaw ghetto had for writing – the need for personal confession, the need to create historical testimony, to resist, to assert

individual agency, the will to continue the Jewish tradition of witnessing or to provide a memorial. Jiří Opelík, with regard to Josef Čapek's poems from the concentration camp, says that, under the given circumstances, poetry probably seemed "highly suitable for expressing the fundamental matters, the substance of human life" (OPELÍK 1980: 246). Karel Josef Beneš, editor of an anthology of World War Two prison poetry, also believed that composing poems was the only way to cope, at least partially, with the harsh prison reality (BENEŠ 1946). When the struggle for bare life was over, the imprisoned started to express through poetry their grief, pains, hopes, longings and dreams as they "gushed out of the yearning heart..." (REICHEL 2004: 282). Poetry brought the prisoners intellectual distraction and moments of relief. According to witnesses (e.g. Ruth Klüger), the encouragement stemmed directly from the chosen form – the regular arrangement of verses, metre and rhythm was a vital counterbalance to chaos and decay omnipresent in the camp (ALFERS 2004: 121). Zdeněk Kalista, imprisoned in the 1950s, recounted: "What relief it brought to me in moments which were the most difficult in my life, when I realized that I could, at least in my mind, create a few verses! [...] they brought me almost physical relief. I felt saved from the danger of perish which was descending on me. I felt as if the circle which was gripping me had been ruptured" (cited according to FERKLOVÁ 2001: 230). Poetry was an answer to the question how to occupy oneself among four walls also for Jiří Hejda, economist who was arrested in 1949 and released from Communist prisons in 1962. His own literary production was a way of making up for the lack of intellectual and spiritual stimuli:

Being alone all day. Without newspapers, a single book, a pen and a paper [...]. Without nothing to do. Not being able to listen to music or even hear someone speak. [...] What shall I occupy myself with? What to think about? [...] In the horror of this dullness where minutes drag more slowly than one can possibly imagine, especially someone used to almost feverish activity, who often could not squeeze everything into a single day, in this desperate dullness I take up writing poems.¹⁰ (HEJDA 2010: 329)

Unsurprisingly, Štefan Sandtner, a Slovak political prisoner, confessed that to him his poems "had become a replacement for *breviary in a way*" (SANDTNER 1998: 91) and Václav Renč said that his prison poems recorded "the struggle of

10) "In solitary confinement it was only possible to think and to almost suffocate by this thinking. There were no people, there were no books either, thus the prisoners themselves became writers and poets. It was because of the excess pressure of emotions and thinking, homesickness, their grieving for life and the beauty of words" (BĚHOUNEK 2004: 297).

light and for light” (a letter from Václav Renč to Jaroslav Med, 23 October 1970). Writing poetry represented a form of a defence reaction to the loss of personal identity and enabled the authors to preserve their sanity. It was a source of consolation and hope, sometimes even an extreme way of leaving a message about oneself – an expression of the last desire to speak for oneself. It cannot be ignored that “[h]undreds and thousands of books were written by death itself. They will never be published and are condensed into a few words of a goodbye sentence written on the walls of prison cells: Departing this life! I’ll be executed tomorrow! Death is liberation! Followed by a name and a date. [...] And among these unknown names we can often find poets who sang of the whole life before death in a few verses”¹¹ (BĚHOUNEK 1947: 389, 394).

Universality of the prison experience is also projected into the durability of this kind of intellectual defence inside totalitarian penal institutions.¹² The story and determination of young poet and activist Irina Ratushinskaya, imprisoned in a female labour camp in Mordovia in the first half of the 1980s, can give us some idea of the creative life and revolt of women imprisoned in ghettos or Nazi camps:

And so Ratushinskaya even here, at the sewing machine, created in secrecy, wrote down her verses on a piece of paper secretly, learnt them by heart secretly and later destroyed the pieces of paper with notes so that they could not be confiscated during the regular searches. Poetry meant a means of self-expression to her, sometimes the only way of existence, because there was freedom within ‘unfreedom’. Everything, till the last bit of an intimate part of the body, was subjected to their control; this was the only place where they had to yield to the poetess’s veto. (RYČLOVÁ 2006: 199)

Approximately at the same time in Czechoslovakia, Ivan Martin Jirous was writing his future collection *Magorovy labutí písně* [Magor’s Swan Songs], hiding it in a leg of the prison bed. During the eight-month-long detention (autumn 1986 to spring 1987) Vladimír Kouřil, sentenced in the process with the committee of the Jazz Section of the Czech Musicians’ Union, was composing an

11) Prisoners did not only recite or read their own prison poetry but they also remembered poems of famous Czech and world poets. In Oranienburg concentration camp the imprisoned-students recalled their favourite poems and even compiled their own reader called *Chléb poezie* (“The Bread of Poetry”; for the motivations of its origin and its meaning for the imprisoned see STRNADEL 2004). Similarly, political prisoners from Communist prisons state that there was always a teacher of Czech language, a book lover among them who knew poems by Březina, Zahradníček or Seifert by heart and could recite them; e.g. a selection of Březina’s works written on toilet paper circulated in the prison (DOLEŽAL 2004: 36), it was prepared by Ferdinand Höfer and it has been displayed in The Museum of Otakar Březina in Jaroměřice nad Rokytinou.

12) It has to be added that it was not only there, as Michal Jareš noticed. Writing, especially writing poetry, was a form of autotherapy also for Czechoslovak exiles in Britain during the World War Two or for Czechoslovak soldiers (JAREŠ 2007).

intimate collection of poems *Z kola vyhozený* [Knocked out of the Game] which was preserved only as a samizdat:

Everyone who has been forming some literary experience since childhood is endowed with more or less suppressed ability to express his or her feelings in literary manner. This condition is activated in extreme life situations and then literary works start to emerge which are important mainly for the individual who wrote them; we could say that they have therapeutic effects on the soul of a writing enthusiast. (From an email correspondence with Vladimír Kouřil, 7 February 2013)

Admittedly, the choice of poetry was partially influenced by pragmatic reasons. In the field of miscellaneous creative activities, literature or – to be more precise – poetry has one practical advantage in such circumstances: poems can be composed despite various spatio-temporal barriers: “Literature, unlike other artistic categories, can be produced almost everywhere, in any life situation. Any old piece of paper and a pencil will do, sometimes the author’s memory is enough” (BINAR 1997: 75). The possibility of creating and preserving one’s work in the memory without any further means was in many cases the decisive factor in choosing this genre. Another unquestionable advantage of poetry was that poems stored in memory could not be confiscated by the prison officers or guards. Therefore, out of all possible intellectual activities that could be carried out e.g. in solitary confinement, poetry represented a unique solution. Something which would fill up the monotonously and slowly passing time was needed, something to prevent the intellectual degeneration. Some prisoners were praying, others were revising their knowledge in their minds, and poetry, too, served as a suitable tool for keeping the mental freshness and as a means of mental hygiene in these limited conditions. It should also be noted that composing poems, unlike reproductive memorizing or praying, is a creative activity – the process of creating useful products. Composing poetic texts and memorizing them had both intellectual and physiological aspect. As Tomáš Glanc noted: “The outstanding feature of Gulag production is its unique physicality – authors lived in sorrow and suffering and preserving their poems was a specific physical process – both during the transport into the world outside the prison and also when they were ‘fixing’ the verses – a process often performed by memorizing or through limited ways of recording” (GLANC 2011: 248). Sandra Alfers (2004: 122–4) emphasizes that not only the final product (i.e. the poem) was important but also the whole creative process – the poetic rendering of the experience, the process of recalling own verses and learning them by heart. At the same time, preserving poetry in the

memory was not such an easy process;¹³ for example Solzhenitsyn “wrote” poetry in camps in the following way: he composed verses in the head and then repeated them with the help of a heap of broken matches” (APPELBAUM 2004: 338).¹⁴

4.

Since the camp and prison poetry fulfilled a completely different function the kind of poetry produced outside the prison walls, the content of the poems nearly always prevailed over the form and language artistry which would be rather complicated to develop by heart.¹⁵ After all, as Czesław Miłosz pointed out referring to works by Michał Borwicz, a characteristic feature of poems from ghettos and camps is the contrast between the shocking and unusual experience and the way it is expressed through common and conventional language, especially in works by ordinary people (MIŁOSZ 2005).¹⁶ At the same time it is not possible to completely agree with Miłosz’s statement that “the authors themselves were primarily just human beings and this humanity limited their artistic skills. Thus, their poems form a stirring document of gigantic measures, yet it is no more than a document” (MIŁOSZ 2005: 154). It is this way of thinking which might lead to simplifying conclusions and hinder deeper interpretations as it was pointed out at the beginning of this study. On the contrary, as Sandra Alfes demonstrated on an example of no more than three poems from Terezín, the poetic rendering of individual authors differs and “it is apparent that such

13) Recording poetry was rather complicated as well: “We have to mention that the concept of writing was not so easy in these circumstances. It did not mean to sit down at a table, to take a pen and paper and to write in peace and quiet. Writing was forbidden, with the exception of official letters for which one Sunday in a month was allotted. Everything else was written in secret, on a lap under the table during work in constant attention and danger, when standing on roll-call or when lying on the bed, in concealment and dim light.” (KVAPILOVÁ 2004: 306)

14) Applebaum refers to the chapter of *The Gulag Archipelago* in which Solzhenitsyn describes the process of composing poetry in gulags in detail – e.g. remembering about 12,000 verses with the help of a special rosary (SOLZHENITSYN 2011: 93–118).

15) “Memory is the only place where you can *tuck away* what you wrote, where you can hide it from searches and transports. At first I did not believe this ability of memory, therefore I decided to write in verses. Of course it meant violating the genre. [...] The more you write, the more days in each month you spend revising. Such revising is harmful because you start getting used to what you wrote and stop distinguishing between strong and weak points” (SOLZHENITSYN 2011: 94–95).

16) Andrés Nader (2007) came to a similar conclusion when analyzing German poetry from concentration camps; in his view the clash between the traditional poetic form and the content reflecting new and tragic experience, is very impressive. Thus, the traditional way of rendering is seen as legitimate.

texts are by no means representatives of homogenous poetry” (ALFERS 2004: 132). Similarly, Zbyněk Fišer in his paper on the Terezín diaries of Egon Redlich in the present volume finds valuable literary features of aestheticization in texts secretly written in the ghetto. Also, the editor of an anthology of East European prison literature points out that the genre of prison literature is rich and varied as far as the form and style are concerned, although all works draw on the same, collectively shared stimuli: the desire to address others, to bear witness, to make known the outrageous assault on liberty and human dignity, the humiliation of the individual and the monstrous inhumanity of the camp system that had been imposed on them (SEGEL 2012: 8).

Moreover, from the perspective of those who survived and returned to their homes, the argument that poetry from totalitarian camps and prisons cannot credibly present the prison experience is not valid. Simeon Vilensky, a former Gulag prisoner and an editor of anthology of Russian labour camp poetry, believes that poems are the most credible documents of what had been happening in the camps. This fact became apparent when I was describing how memory was transforming recollections and how it was changing the text after years. We were not allowed to have pencils and paper in the labour camp. Thus all memories and memoirs were written after the release, yet not the poems. If a prisoner in a labour camp or a prison composed a poem, he would memorize it and it would remain in the same form till these days. It is not possible to leave out an unpleasant verse, memory or a name now – it is as it is and if someone wanted to re-write it, it would be hard and ridiculous work. Also, poems were memorized by other inmates which means that if the author had not survived, his poems have still been preserved. (VILENSKY 2010: 64)

In the poems written in prison “one important thing remains – the authentic condition in which my momentary emotional effusions originated in the confined space of two cells at Ruzyně Prison because of the lack of contact with those I had been connected with by long-lasting friendship or even intimate mutuality” (from an email correspondence with Vladimír Kouřil, 7 February 2013).

5.

Let us briefly discuss one more remarkable feature of poetry which was written in the totalitarian camps and prisons and which is related to its authorship. It is

astonishing that the poetic production was spread massively among all groups of imprisoned, especially those who had never been interested in poetry before. K. J. Beneš says that writing poetry in Nazi prisons spread among political prisoners almost exponentially, both among intellectuals and uneducated prisoners (BENEŠ 1946: 7). In case of Terezín ghetto, H. G. Adler interpreted this phenomenon in the following way: the family life of prisoners was disrupted, there were no common worries and social duties and thus, all of a sudden, activities which the individuals would have never thought about (except for when they were young) became important. Especially those prisoners who did not work had a lot of time on their hands which they would spend by composing poems. This led to “Terezín rhyming disease” and sometimes even to the immodest desire of self-appointed poets for admiration and recognition (ADLER 2006: 446–447).¹⁷

Many former Czechoslovak political prisoners from the 1950s comment on the widespread poetic production in prison.

Authentic poetry originated here which was a genuine encouragement for prisoners who, in most cases, had not paid any attention to poems prior to their imprisonment. The prison poetry widened their intellectual space, gave them strength for life behind the bars and for resistance, too. [...] Besides famous poets, poetry was also written by individuals who only produced a few poems or just a single one; however, these original verses meant great support to them and led them from the dusk of death towards the dawn of life. (ROBEŠ 2010: 201)

Female political prisoners from the same time were in a similar situation; according to one of them, Božena Kuklová-Jíšová, every other imprisoned woman tried to write (KUKLOVÁ-JÍŠOVÁ 2002). Knut Skujenieks, a Latvian poet imprisoned for seven years in a Soviet labour camp in the 1960s, recalls: “People who had not paid attention to poetry, painting or music in their previous lives, started to create in prison, sometimes with a considerable amount of talent. However, most of them did not continue in these activities after their return to “normal” life. [...] It is possible that creative work was spiritual self-defence for these people” (SKUJENIEKS 1997: 57). Another former political prisoner, Rudolf Dobiáš, the author of anthology of poetry of Slovak political

17) “Rhyming disease” was also present in other extreme conditions. M. Jareš quotes Rudolf Nekola, an editor of a military journal *Naše noviny*, describing the life of a mechanized squadron in 1914 with a trace of irony: “Poems are being composed here. It is a thing we have to do even if there was nothing to eat. And because we have salt, meat and also dumplings, the verses are pouring out.” (Rudolf Nekola cited according to JAREŠ 2007: 51)

prisoners *Básníci za mrežami. Antologie poézie napísanej vo väzení* [Poets Behind Bars. Anthology of Poetry Written in Prison] said in an interview about the poetic production of his inmates: “They wanted to comment on it, either to protest or to meditate about their fate; simply, they wanted to purify themselves” (An interview with Rudolf Dobiáš, 26 February 2013); saying elsewhere that “there is a type of poet that is born like this (*poeta natus*), but there are probably also poets who become poets during the course of their lives” (DOBIÁŠ 2009: 5–6). Here, one specific feature of this subgenre stands out, as it was summarized by Tomáš Glanc:

Some [prisoners] appeared in literature only because of the fact that they had been writing poetry in Soviet labour camps, and today they exclusively belong to the labour camp literature. The names of Mikhail Frolovskij or Leonid Sitko will not be found in literary histories, apart from those who focus on studying literature written behind barbed-wire fences. Other authors, e.g. Jurij Dombrovskij or Yuly Daniel linked some of their works with Soviet concentration camps both thematically and biographically; however, they also wrote other works and became classics. Finally, there are authors such as Varlam Shalamov whose whole life and work are references to the Communist prison system. This horrific system was immortalized in his fiction which has become famous around the whole world. (GLANC 2011: 248)

Similarly, we could find more or less established writers among the authors of Czech prison poetry – genuine poets or writers of prose, and also nonprofessional writers and amateurs, “ordinary” prisoners without literary training.

On the other hand, professional writers in prisons and camps found themselves in slightly more complicated creative circumstances. Some of them fell silent under the influence of horrors they had experienced; others, if they continued writing, tried to belittle the influence of the surroundings and resist the pressure in order not to disrupt the wholeness of their existing works. However, there were also writers who decided not to care about their existing writings and decided to support their inmates psychologically, even at the cost of submitting the way of their own literary expression to it.¹⁸ We have to bear this in mind when assessing e.g. Josef Čapek’s poems from the concentration camp. Jiří Opelík pointed out that while in his texts written outside the prison cell Čapek’s creative principle

18) This was not necessarily the norm at all times however. As Robert Laurence recalls about poet Robert Desnos imprisoned at Flöha, a subsidiary camp of the concentration camp Flossenburg: “Desnos was writing a long, and as far as I could understand, surrealist poem: *Le Cuirassier Nègre*. He was reading extracts to us, which were equally dark and melodious. The text was written on cigarette papers hidden in a metal box which Rödel was keeping (he was also writing poetry) and which disappeared together with him.” (DESNOS 1984: 276)

was nonconformity and originality, when imprisoned in the labour camp “he resorted to poetry for the innermost need, [...] he did not approach it from the perspective of a professional writer” (OPELÍK 1980: 247) and adjusted his poetic language to the inmates of the camp in order to meet their needs and requirements. Čapek was also aware that his poems would be copied in the labour camp and circulated among prisoners (IBID.: 248–250). Václav Renč intended his prison work in a similar way – he wanted to comfort other prisoners (REJMAN 2006: 16–17); Jaroslav Med says about *Popelka nazaretská* [Cinderella of Nazareth]: “Therefore it has a specific form and differs from the general character of Renč’s work in its simplicity, diction and type of verse. After all, it was written for prisoners so that they could easily memorize it and it would be pressed into their minds” (MED 2007: 151). Prison poems were not important only for the authors themselves; they often positively influenced a lot of their inmates. Numerous memoirs bring testimony about poems which helped to give strength and to survive, to forget about the cruel surroundings. One of the aspects of labour camp writing is that, where possible, an individual does not create in isolation, but from within and for a specific community, he or she feels obliged to express the collective suffering and emotions (WAXMAN 2005: 8).

6.

Labour camp and prison poetry has been regarded with suspicion and incomprehension for a long time; many of those who had not gone through the extreme experience of imprisonment were reluctant to believe the profound sense of prison poetic words. “Many and many prisoners wrote or recited poetry, they repeated their own verses and those of others again and again and later they repeated them to their inmates. In the 1960s Yevgenia Ginzburg, a Russian author and Gulag prisoner, met a writer in Moscow who did not believe that prisoners in such conditions had been able to repeat poems and to draw comfort from them” (APPLEBAUM 2004: 337). However, the therapeutic function of poetry cannot be doubted, a view which is supported e.g. by an academic *Journal of Poetry Therapy* which focuses on serious research on poetry as a therapeutic tool. It also must be added that for many of those who survived or were released from prison, prison poetry had a vital importance in their further life

and represented one of unconscious but effective means of facing the traumatic consequences of a prison, i.e. the survivor-syndrome, holocaust-syndrome (see HOLÝ 2011, 2012a) or “trauma of the shaken ones” (according to Jan Patočka, see HOLÝ 2011, 2012a). For example “Ilse Weber’s poems helped a lot of people to find their place in a new life and to cope in their memories with the horrors they had gone through. Many years later, Ilse’s son Willi Weber was getting letters in which those who had survived wrote to him about the above mentioned effect of his poems” (MIGDAL 2012: 310). Still many years later, former prisoners remember the prison poetry and with respect, humility and emotion are able to recite the poems, thanks to which they did not lose the will to live. “A labour camp poem which stuck in my memory the most was Anička Kvapilová’s *Touha*. It helped me even later, at home, in hard times. It was a kind of prayer for me; as soon as I repeated it, I immediately realized that I had already gone through harder times in my life. I have never forgotten it” (SKLENIČKOVÁ 2006: 99–100).

In the extreme conditions of totalitarian camps and prisons, a man-prisoner, not just a poet-prisoner, tended to write poetry which filled him with or her hope, helped to restore his or her mental powers or just helped to chase away the emptiness of the prison cell. “A poem itself became a way of surviving” (GLANC 2004: 249). Although prison poems were widespread, we (both readers and scholars) have found only little information about them. A kind of commitment to the future may lie in, at least in the Czech literary studies, systematization of the sources of this literary production (both of the Nazi and Communist period) which has been neglected for decades, and mainly interpretation of this specific production which would include various (not only literary) criteria and offer the characteristics of the genre of prison poetry and deeper comparison of these works, e.g. in the international context. Breaking down the existing prejudice concerning labour camp and prison poetry will enable us to perceive all its generic variations and meanings and to incorporate it into the framework of our legitimate cultural and historical memory.

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