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The Terezín Diaries of Egon Redlich from the Perspective of Writing Theory

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Literary diary – holocaust – prison diary

ABSTRACT:

The texts of Egon Redlich are viewed from the perspective of theory and didactics of text composition, in which autobiographic writing has mainly abreactive functions for the writer. The Terezín diaries (1942–1944) of Egon Redlich (1916–1944) are written in the form of a chronicle for his fiancée or a biography for his new-born son. For their author, the entries had more than just documentary or cathartic purpose. The text's gradually developing literary methods (intertextuality, generic variability ranging from chronicle and description to exemplum and anecdote, to humour and irony) is what makes the diaries a literarily valuable message to readers who manage to outlive the absurd war.

Texts and works which thematize a traumatic experience on the one hand demonstrate how the author was feeling at the time of a specific event; on the other hand they depict the artist's image of this world, both real or made up. Recipients, readers or audiences of these depictions of the outer and inner world are most frequently interested in the record, portrayal or reflection of experience which the work provides and which the author wanted to communicate and share with others. In case of an artistic work which deals with overcoming trauma and its consequences, researchers might be concerned with a slightly different aspect of phenomena and circumstances. Most often we are interested in deal with the authenticity of a particular account, a specific artistic message. We can examine how the message is embedded in the historical and social

reality of “the big history”, or the role of an individual’s fight for survival in the context of the small, personal history of the author. We can compare the artistic message as a testimony of overcoming long-term, intensive stress with similar records of experience. However, the specific topic of depicting trauma in art requires specific research approaches and perspectives which will bring us closer to the artistic message of such a work. Perceiving a work in its communicative form, we are not only interested in its content but also in other factors of the communicative event. Being a specialist in the theory and methodology of writing myself, I would like to direct our attention to the question of author, writer, creator of a scriptural product as well as the motivation of their creative activity (for the time being I choose to avoid the term *author of a literary work* for I wish to discuss texts which were not written with a stated literary ambition).

Texts describing author’s suffering and how they managed to overcome it or how they succumbed to it are created with various motivations. The most common motivation which is the need to document is the present events and the way they are perceived; another reason is the chronicling intent to provide a testimony of the events. Writing down traumatizing memories can bring about a moment of purge, justification of self or the past deeds – either real ones or the ones ascribed to the person; the text can work as a self-defence or a confession. The most personal motivation is the need to get rid of torturing thoughts by writing about the events a one experiences; a need to purify oneself internally. This approach could be called *writing from the inside*.

The theory and methodology of writing is familiar with this *abreactive function* of personal writing and acknowledges it as a legitimate function of the text formation process. It is a kind of writing which enables the author to unwind from the stressful, depressing and daunting complex of feelings, moods and mental conditions; from tension, anxiety, reproaches, obsessions or persevering questions. Abreactive writing can often have a self-therapeutic effect. Expressing negative feelings enables the writer to reveal their origin and look for ways to face them. The writer can thus switch to the retrospective or proactive kind of writing which allows for them to create models of successful solutions to stressful and traumatizing situations and conditions. In this way the author can achieve certain peace of mind, emotional balance and temporary cognitive stabilization.

As a writing methodologist I would like to raise the following question: what does writing a prison diary, prisoner memories or memoirs of the persecuted for the authors themselves? These imprisonments have various forms – how

do the texts dealing with them vary? To be more precise: what are the different forms of autobiographical writing based on this authorial experience? Is it possible to find any similarities between this kind of writing and the one performed *outside* the prison walls?

Egon Redlich (born 1916), imprisoned in Terezín, started his prison diary in Hebrew and Czech on 1st January 1942 which he kept till his transportation to the East, i.e. September 1944 (the last entry is 22nd October 1944).¹ He arrived in Terezín on 4th December 1941 without his fiancée, Gerta Bäck from Dukovany who was deported later from Prague. The impetus for starting the diary was Redlich's need to record important events and facts for his absent fiancée: "I hope that all I am writing here will be meaningful one day. Everything has only one purpose: someday to inform Beczulkah, since I cannot write to her, about what I have gone through and experienced here," Redlich wrote in the third entry in the diary, or a day earlier: "Thanks to this book she will know what I have seen, felt and learnt." (REDLICH 1995: 82). The diary is a brief chronicle of a ghetto and a testimony about the author's perception and evaluation of his situation (and his family situation later on, as well), seen from the perspective of his religious and political attitudes. It also represents a view of a young educated man confronted with his own compassion, tolerance and professional responsibility.² At the same time, one layer of the diary is formed by the author's love diary, especially the parts addressing his absent fiancée written in Czech. After Egon Redlich and Gerta Bäck's son Dan Petr had been born in Terezín on 16th March 1944, Redlich started to write a parallel diary in the form of a letter: "My son was born. [...] I would like to give my dear [Gerta] a diary where his biography would be written down" (IBID.: 214). And so Egon Redlich, a literarily talented law student becomes the biographer of his own son, utilizing the framework of biblical stories re-actualized by his own personal situation of life in the ghetto and in war times. Redlich, feeling that one day not even he will be able to avoid the transport feared by everyone in Terezín, closes his record from 11th May 1944 with a quotation from Genesis (Gn. 4:12 "Listen, Dan: 'You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth...'" (IBID.: 222).³ Redlich uses

1) Until 17th July 1943 Redlich kept his diary bilingually: Saturday entries were written in Czech and often contained the summaries of past events. Texts in New Hebrew were translated into Czech by Hana Lionová and Bedřich Nosek; they were prepared for publication by the editor of the book Miroslav Kryl.

2) Egon Redlich worked as an important clerk in the management of a children's home in Terezín as the head of the children and youth social welfare department; he advocated the ideas of Zionism and dreamt of resettlement to Palestine.

3) Translators to Czech used a biblical quotation according to the translation of The Bible of Kralice.

purely literary techniques in this letter-biography and intertextuality is the most noticeable feature which is rather natural if we take into consideration the fact that the author was a religious person. However, the whole record from 11th May is built on literary principles; Redlich narrates the event as a paradoxical exemplum, as an absurd Jewish anecdote or as a fable with a moral (REDLICH 1995: 222):

May 11th

The sun was shining and an orchestra was playing, they were painting facades of houses – beautifying the town, “Stadtverschönerung” and there in Berlin somebody decided: seven thousand and five hundred Jews will go to the East so as there is enough space for the “Stadtverschönerung”.

Listen, Dan: ‘You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth...’, that is the worst curse.

The life of a newborn baby is described as a small miracle not because of the perceptive depiction of his young father who must be kind and fearless. After all, the very fact that Redlich’s wife did not have to undergo interruption as many other women in Terezín suggests a similarity with the story of escape from Herod the Great. The recorded episodes from the life in the ghetto follow in quick succession as condensed parables in a biblical text. Another short entry in the letter to his son has aphoristic form; as we read on, we see the author resorting to irony more and more often. However, using irony in a conversation with a newborn baby is unnatural; we do not expect that a child could understand it. Thus irony becomes the norm or the manifestation of what is normal and common. The author is aware of this semantic shift in perceiving the portrayed world: the absurd behaviour of jailers is no longer described in inverted commas:

Our enemies are compassionate, very compassionate. They are putting the incurably sick, orphans and old people on freight wagons heading to the East – but they ordered to repaint an image of a tiger with a baby in its mouth so that the small children are not terrified by it. And the orchestra have to play only cheerful tunes. (REDLICH 1995: 223, recorded on 1st June 1944)

Redlich’s diary was found in Terezín in 1967 in a handbag hidden in a brick wall in the attic of a house on the street now known as Dlouhá ulice 15. Neither Gerta nor Dan took it to the East with them. The author made sure that his confession would be preserved for future generations. The chronicle for his absent fiancée and the biography for his newborn son which represented a miraculous

or sacred element in Egon Redlich's life in the same way as the faith of fathers is miraculous and sacred, enabled the author to express even those ideas which he could not utilize in the other texts he created: in official records, assessments and judgements, in reports, application forms, censorship adjustments when editing a youth magazine – a kind of Terezín samizdat – or in the thirty-word letters which were allowed to be sent from Terezín. The chronicle does not record only succinct events; the author also records observations of the countryside, portrayals of his colleagues, friends or other people living in the ghetto, descriptions of impressive scenes or their aphoristic commentaries.⁴ The author gradually develops a style of writing which makes for, in the case of the letter to his son, a pleasant, entertaining, humorous or informative read. Admittedly, it is rather black humour but it does have a purifying effect and it can lighten the tragic fates of those it is related to.

They are shooting a film about the life in the ghetto, a nice film. [...] They really filmed Jews dancing in the "saloon". They also wanted to film you, to show a happy family. Fortunately for us, this intention was not put in practice. Although this film might have been a nice memory of you as a baby, instead of a photo, it still would have been sad and shameful. Egyptian kings never filmed children whom they planned on murdering, did they? (REDLICH 1995: 229, recorded on 6th September 1944)

Redlich's diary is an example of biographic writing with the function of abreaction. It was not written for an audience, rather for the pleasure of the writer.⁵ The text of the diaries does not indicate that the author let anybody read his records. He would lead his religious or political debates with selected residents of the ghetto by different means and at different places. The diary remained an exclusively individual, deliberately and intentionally private activity of the author. However, the image of a potential receiver enables the author to start writing in a stylized way and to continue this liberating activity. A historian or a psychologist can look for other functions in the text: we will content ourselves with the purifying role of unobtrusive, unpretentious literary stylization of a perceptive man, attempting to maintain his inner emotional stability and

4) The Czech entry about a surprising event when somebody placed flowers on the grave of a Jew who died of blood poisoning is concluded by words "sepsis-skepsis (scepticism)": *...flowers on the grave of a Jew who died, sepsis – "skepsis"* (recorded on 3rd January 1942). In this pun the writer both comments on the feeling of the ghetto residents and condenses the event when the members of the burial society noted down the reason of his death as "scepticism" instead of "sepsis" (cf. entry from 4 January 1942, both REDLICH, 1995: 83).

5) Some names were coded by Redlich, e.g. for Adolf Eichmann he used Hebraic "ish alon", i.e. "man oak", as the translation of the German Eiche = oak, Mann = man (cf. Redlich, 1995: 95).

moral integrity which will enable him to face honestly both known and unforeseen dangers. Since the author is not writing the texts with a literary ambition and does not declare himself as a writer and the text as a work of art, he can fully utilize the purifying potential of abreactive writing. Being an author whose work does not have to find its reader he has nothing to lose. The glory of the authorship does not play the slightest role in a prison diary.⁶

Viewed from the literary-aesthetic perspective, Redlich's diaries appear to be a work of an author who knows that the text might appeal to a wider audience.⁷ Redlich was an author with literary knowledge, he was familiar with Talmud and he also read contemporary Czech prose. Records in the diary reveal Redlich's literary ambitions and also the fact that during his stay in Terezín Redlich created and probably even published (for his close friends) some short stories and short dramatic texts which have not been preserved till our time. The literary value of the diaries is gradually increasing because of Redlich's thematizing perspective of his living conditions. Whereas at the beginning the chronicler recorded some events at least in brief as the witness of horrors, the following story of the family and their act of defiance – along with the birth of their son, who was innocent but predestined to death – are depicted without any emphasis on scepticism or despair. The scriptural reflections of present moments provide the writer with some space for relaxation, for acquiring balance and emotional stability. In the state of calmness of someone who already knows what will happen, the literary rendition of the topic can be a source of feeling of satisfaction coming from a successfully delivered message. Egon Redlich's text seems to be a testament of himself as a writer: if something is to survive which has the power to speak to a potential reader, then it should be the text carrying some of my ways of seeing and perceiving and contemplating of this world and us in it. The author does not see the value of the text in WHAT it is about but HOW it is rendered.

6) We can assume that if the diary had been revealed under given circumstances and read by someone else than the author himself, many lives, not only of those belonging to the author's family, could have been endangered. Concealment was an important condition of this cathartic scriptural activity.

7) Not all prison diaries are written with the intentional use of literary techniques. Especially the chronicling aims could be endangered in the eyes of the writer by literary stylization (cf. e.g. *Deník Otty Wolfa*, Praha: Sefer, 1997). Other type of work with the story of one's own imprisonment can be found in memoirs. Sibylle Plogstedt starts to write her book *Im Netz der Gedichte. Gefangen in Prag nach 1968*, (Berlin: Links, 2001; in Czech Brno: Doplněk, 2002) intentionally as a purifying autotherapeutic confession. By the detailed reconstruction of memories she wants to discover the truth about her political imprisonment in Prague between 1969 and 1971, how she was manipulated by her cellmate Marta who collaborated with the State Police. Although Plogstedt does not find any direct evidence that Marta was connected to the police, although she cannot prove that she was secretly drugged in the prison and as a foreigner she is denied access to all documents relating to her person, the investigative journalistic work "heals" her and readers read the testimony about her trauma as a gripping story with an unspoken message about the suspected truth and acquired personal balance.

From the author's perspective, creating an artistic text is an act of creating values. The writing of an artistically stylized text is the manifestation of positive and free activity in suppressed and limiting conditions in a non-standard, daunting situation the author was thrown into against his own will. The scriptural creation as a thoroughly positive act is a coping strategy to manage long-term stress; it is a personal defence against humiliation and physical and psychological violence. Such writing is understood as a value put into opposition to jailors who suppress, refuse or ignore the social and cultural values by the act of unjust imprisonment.⁸

The questions asked at the beginning of this analysis should not remain unanswered. Certain differences can be found in the intention of the author. Author of a personal diary written with the aim of subsequent publication may intentionally distort some facts.⁹ The degree of coding names, places or events depends on the need for concealment, or rather on the consideration of the author for the persons mentioned; the information leakage might cause various sanctions towards those explicitly mentioned, especially in an oppressed society. Those diaries which are not intended for publication tend to record intimate feelings and conditions, their writers thematize interpersonal constellations and interactions or consider their consequences. Here, the author aims to primarily solve his own personal problems which can explain his need to code his messages even more.

Keeping a diary in limiting conditions of the prison is on the one hand threatened by possible disclosure and subsequent sanction. On the other hand the hope for its deserving publication in future times of freedom can motivate the writer to thematize the intersubjective facts. The situation of the author is so unique that they feel obliged to contextualize it as plausibly as possible. The diary can thus acquire the form of a chronicle and fulfil the archival function or the form of a reportage and record personal testimony of the situation in the given society and time. The text of the diary can also have a form of a verbal time-lapse document which will be sorted out only later. The author even waives his or her right to be the final judge of the portrayed acts and events – this

8) These conclusions are close to findings about the motivation of writing poetry in prison which were discovered by Petra Čáslavová in her work. Cf. Čáslavová's MA thesis "Poetry Facing the Extreme: Czech Poetry Originated in Concentration Camps, Communist Labour Camps and Totalitarian Prisons." Brno: FF MU, 2009; or her conference paper in Padova 2011.

9) Literary criticism has noted the striking feature of "showing off" in numerous diaries published in the 1990s as the manifestation of unrestrained exhibitionism of the authors which lowers the informational and aesthetic quality of the texts.

role is seemingly left to the reader.¹⁰ The abreactive function for the writer is in them taking on the role of a recorder, a reporter and a witness. Such approach to the text means that various generic features and stylistic techniques are mixed together. This can be seen in the diaries written by Egon Redlich. Keeping secret records in the prison does not allow for self-centred, exhibitionist writing. The writing prisoner tries to balance out the self-awareness of the subjective perspective with the composition of the text, by the choice of serious themes and their economical depiction.¹¹ Literariness is thus a legitimate feature of a personal prison diary since it meets the requirements of a condensed reportage created in problematic conditions.¹² Such kind of stylized writing holds internally strengthening value for the suppressed writer.

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10) This feature is present e.g. in *Notes from the Gallows* by Julius Fučík.

11) From the cognitive perspective it can be not only codes but also metaphors, intertextuality, similes or exemplum.

12) In the case of Redlich's diary there is no information about the conditions in which he wrote his records. Nevertheless, we can assume that it must have been a thoroughly secret and both spatially (given the lack of paper) and chronologically limited activity. This fact is also confirmed by the shortness of the entries.

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