

## History, Fiction, and the Holocaust: Narrative Perspective and Ethical Responsibility

Jeremy Hawthorn

Norwegian University of Science and Technology

All writing about the Holocaust faces ethical challenges to which there is rarely a single, morally unimpeachable, answer. The atrocities must be remembered, they must be recorded as fully as possible. But those who suffered and died have rights that extend beyond merely having their fates registered and made known. These rights include that of having their stories told honestly and accurately, but an important additional right is that to a certain privacy, a right not to have that which is most personal unnecessarily displayed for all to witness, not to have those identity defining boundaries that separate the individual from the public unheedingly crossed. As far as is possible, the victim's right to keep parts of his or her life and suffering away from public display must be respected. That this and other rights were denied by the perpetrators during the atrocities does not mean that they no longer exist after death. Balancing the duty to record and the duty to respect inevitably involves painful ethical decisions.

Primo Levi has written of a recurring dream that he had during his time as an Auschwitz prisoner, one which he discovered was also dreamt by other survivors. In the dream, after re-living sense-memories of the camp, he is telling his story to his sister, "with some unidentifiable friend and many other people."

It is an intense pleasure, physical, inexpressible, to be at home, among friendly people and to have so many things to recount: but I cannot help noticing that my listeners do

not follow me. In fact, they are completely indifferent: they speak confusedly of other things among themselves, as if I was not there. My sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word. (Levi 1996, 60)

The dream account implies a moral imperative: those remaining, including those not even born at the time that these things happened, must listen, must see and not avert their eyes.

But sometimes the impulse to look away is powerful, even physical, and ethically informed. The unprepared reader who opens Janina Struk's book *Photographing the Holocaust* finds that this figure of speech is brutally jerked from the metaphorical to the literal. Facing the first page of the volume's Introduction is a full-page photograph entitled "Tormenting the Jews before their execution." It shows four men and a small boy – all naked – surrounded by soldiers and armed men in civilian dress, who are carrying rifles. Struk dates the beginning of her research into photographs taken during the Holocaust to her shocked encounter with this photograph "as I was filing through photographs in the Polish Underground Movement (1939–45) Study Trust ... housed in a leafy suburb of west London" (Struk 2004, 3). She reports how "thoroughly shocked" she was by the image, but adds the following comment.

I felt ashamed to be examining this barbaric scene, voyeuristic for witnessing their nakedness and vulnerability, and disturbed because the act of looking at this photograph put me in the position of the possible assassin. But I was compelled to look, as if the more I looked the more information I could gain. (3)

The moral imperatives advanced by these two accounts are, if not incompatible, certainly in

tension. We must not remain indifferent or turn away from accounts of the atrocities, as do those in Levi's dream, but we cannot escape a shamed sense that we are committing a moral outrage in observing and disseminating the suffering and murder of those who died, even though to register their fates requires that we do not avert our eyes, metaphorically or, in some cases, literally.

There are, nonetheless, discriminations to be made beyond the stark either-or decisions that these two accounts might suggest. If the imperative to document the wickedness requires that the injunction to respect the victims' privacy at the time of their suffering and moment of death be put aside, this does not mean that once a decision to not turn aside has been made there are no further ethical decisions to be made. If this is true of historical accounts of the Holocaust, it is no less true – indeed, perhaps more true – of works of fiction that deal with this subject. A case has been made, more than once, that the Holocaust is not a fit subject for fictional representation. At a time when Holocaust denial stubbornly persists in spite of painstakingly detailed refutations, surely only the truth will suffice. Why blur the line between the real and the imagined, the documentary and the fictional? Such misgivings are called forth in an especially powerful form by accounts that add imagined detail to established historical fact – what has in other contexts been termed “faction.” Eli Pfefferkorn and David H. Hirsch, the editors of the English translation of Sara Nomberg-Przytyk's collection of Holocaust stories published as *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, note in an afterword to the collection that “even [Eli] Wiesel has recognized that sometimes it is only fiction that can make the truth credible,” and they quote from his imagined conversation with a Rabbi who accuses him of writing lies: “Things are not that simple, Rebbe. Some events do take place but are not true; others are, although they never occurred” (Nomberg-Przytyk 1985, 166).

Dorrit Cohn has described the ability of a narrator to enter the consciousness of a character apart from him- or herself as one of the distinctive signs of fiction (Cohn 1999, 130). The ability of fiction to give the reader access to the inner world of characters is one possibility offered by fictional accounts of Holocaust experiences. Rather than seeing victims only from the outside, fictional accounts grant readers some fuller sense of the unique personhoods of those who suffered and died. These accounts individualize more completely than do those written by historians; they force upon the reader a fuller awareness of the fact that each and every one of these victims had their own rich and unique inner life. If the full horror of the murders is to be conveyed, those murdered have to be perceived not unemotionally, viewed from the outside and at a distance, as anonymous strangers, but encountered as rich, multi-dimensional individuals with inner lives full of promise and replete with intellectual and emotional complexity. In his book *Etikk i Litteratur og Film* (Ethics in Literature and Film), Jakob Lothe traces the distinction between poetry and history back to Aristotle. The poet presents what might have happened, the historian what did happen. As Lothe comments, by presenting and dramatizing what could or might have happened, the writer can by aesthetic means inspire the reader to think, to experience, and to empathize (Lothe 2016, 14). Lothe accepts, however, that there hardly exist “pure” examples of fiction or history that bear no traces of narrative organization, and I want in what follows to consider the ethical issues that certain hybrid forms raise, focussing on one in particular: is the attempt to allow the reader to experience the sort of knowledge of victims that is normally reserved to the individuals themselves, or those in some sort of intimate relationship with them, morally defensible? Do depictions of the imagined inner lives of real victims remove from them the last private possession that has not been taken from them: that sense of owning exclusive access to their private, inner selves that is the mark of personhood?

Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988) contains a very short (a page-and-a-half) section sub-headed *What Are the Author's Responsibilities to Those Whose Lives Are Used as "Material"?*. He opens this section with the following comment. "Are there limits to the author's freedom to expose, in the service of art or self, the most delicate secrets of those whose lives provide material? The question is generally ignored in current criticism, and I can only touch on it here" (Booth 1988, 130). After a brief mention of how the question is pursued with great dexterity in Philip Roth's Zuckerman novels, Booth concludes, "But it is not our business to worry much about this question. Biting as it may be for a given author, it does not arise for readers except when they have more or less accidental knowledge about the author's life" (130–31).

I believe that, on the contrary, this question is "biting," and ethically challenging, for readers of certain works who have little or no knowledge of the author's life or of the lives of those real people upon whom fictional characters are based. To illustrate this issue I will now consider three narratives concerned with a single, relatively well-documented historical event: the shooting of an SS soldier named Josef Schillinger by a woman outside the gas chamber in Auschwitz where she was awaiting death. The three works include two short pieces, and a longer complete novel. The two shorter tales are "The Death of Schillinger" by Tadeusz Borowski (first published in Polish 1959 and in English translation in 1967, but written shortly after his release from Auschwitz in 1945 and before his suicide in 1951), and "Revenge of a Dancer" by Sara Nomberg-Przytyk (published in English translation from the unpublished Polish manuscript in 1985, and written before 1967 when publication in Poland was denied). The novel is *A Prayer for Katerina Horovitzova* by Arnošt Lustig (published in Czech in 1964 and in English translation in 1973). I have previously written briefly about the two shorter works in the context of a discussion of fiction and recent history (in Hawthorn

2017, 252–7). Both are first-person accounts, while Lustig’s novel is written in the third person. Extending discussion to the novel, which grants the reader access to the imagined consciousnesses of real-world characters, allows me to compare works dealing with the same historical events that allow or deny readers direct access to the consciousness of historical individuals. All three authors survived incarceration in the Auschwitz death camp.

Not the least of the sadly representative ironies of this historical event is the fact that the identity of the SS officer killed is better documented than is that of the woman who shot him. All agree that he was a “Rapportführer” or roll-call officer named Josef Schillinger, who in October or November, 1943, received a fatal injury when a woman awaiting the gas chamber seized a pistol and shot him. Beyond this, as Eric J. Sundquist comments, “the diversity of the accounts, as well as the variety of irreconcilable details they feature, provides a case study of the hazardous terrain between historical fact and imaginative reconstruction” (Sundquist 2013, 259). The earliest published account appears to be a single short paragraph in Eugen Kogon’s *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them*, which was first published in German in 1946. Kogon reports that

On another occasion Roll Call Officer Schillinger made an Italian dancer perform naked before the crematory. Taking advantage of a favorable moment, the woman approached him, seized his gun, and shot him down. In the ensuing struggle she herself was killed, at least escaping death by gas. (Kogon 2006, 234)

There is a brief mention of the event in the memoirs of Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss written shortly before his execution in 1947. A document in the U.S. National Archives and Record Administration, declassified only in 2010, reads as follows: “INCIDENTS: 48.

Informant remembers that in Nov 43 there occurred the celebrated incident when a notorious S.S. SCHARFUEHRER, SCHILLINGER, one of the worst murderers and henchmen in Birkenau, was shot dead with his own revolver by a French Jewish actress who had already been stripped naked and was about to be gassed.” Another account, by Auschwitz survivor Wieslaw Kielar in his memoir *Anus Mundi: Five Years in Auschwitz*, was first published in Polish in 1972.

The fullest documentary account of the event, eight pages long, is contained in Filip Müller’s *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers* (1979, but previously published in Czech). Müller was a member of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and he claims to have himself witnessed the event. He describes a group of some thousand “Jews from eastern Europe” who were well-dressed and not bearing Stars of David, who believed that they were to be allowed to enter Switzerland en route to South America because they had paid large sums of money to the Nazi authorities. The deception was part of an elaborate scheme on the part of the Nazis to get their hands on money deposited in neutral countries such as Switzerland. The individuals involved had been told that before being allowed into Switzerland they had to be disinfected. Müller reports that one told him: “I don’t understand what all this is about. After all we have valid entry visas for Paraguay; and what’s more, we paid the Gestapo a great deal of money to get our exit permits” (Müller 1999, 88). After all pretence had been dropped and the prisoners were no longer treated politely but savagely beaten and forced to undress prior to being gassed, Müller reports:

Quackernack and Schillinger were strutting back and forth in front of the humiliated crowd with a self-important swagger. Suddenly they stopped in their tracks, attracted by a strikingly handsome woman with blue-black hair who was taking off her right

shoe. The woman, as soon as she noticed that the two men were ogling her, launched into what appeared to be a titillating and seductive strip-tease act.

...

What happened next took place with lightning speed: quick as a flash she grabbed her shoe and slammed its high heel violently against Quackernack's forehead. He winced with pain and covered his face with both hands. At this moment the young woman flung herself at him and made a quick grab for his pistol. There was a shot. Schillinger cried out and fell to the ground. (Müller 1999, 87–8).

Some Holocaust narratives (such, for example, as the film *Schindler's List*) have been criticized for picking on stories of survival or resistance that are so unrepresentative that they effectively misrepresent history. Can this criticism be levelled at works of fiction that retell the story of Schillinger's death, an event which was certainly neither typical nor representative? The short final paragraph in Müller's narrative begins in a way that is very far from being triumphalist: "As for us, these events had taught us once again that there simply was no chance of escape once a person entered the crematorium: by then it was too late" (89). The story of the shooting of Schillinger can be inflected in different ways. It can for example be presented as a heroic if doomed refusal by the woman to accept the inevitability of her impending murder, accompanied by a determination to take at least one of the perpetrators with her, or as a meaningless act that (as Müller has it) merely exposed the impossibility of escape. In the three accounts that I will discuss, the inflection is in each case more nuanced: neither triumphalist nor pessimistically illustrative of the pointlessness of resistance.

Reviewing various accounts of the event, Eric J. Sundquist admits that "It is an open question whether Müller's account is more accurate than those of other witnesses," while



noting that in “its delineation of consciousness and its narrative coherence, however, its closest analog appears in Arnost Lustig’s novel *A Prayer for Katerina Horovitzova*” (Sundquist 2013, 264). Sundquist provides a precise date for the event: 23 October, 1943, and suggests that the date given in Sara Nomberg-Przytyk’s narrative (July 1944) may have been chosen “to bring it into closer proximity with the revolt of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando that occurred in October 1944” (260). Kirsty Chatwood notes too that Nomberg-Przytyk “did not arrive in Auschwitz-Birkenau until January 1944 and cannot have been a witness to the event itself (nor does she claim to be)” (Chatwood 2010, 66). Nomberg-Przytyk also places the event at the “selection” taking place as women disembarked from the train at Auschwitz, while Sundquist accepts “most testimonial accounts,” which “place the woman’s rebellion not on the Auschwitz ramp where selections took place but in the undressing room outside the gas chamber of Crematorium II, where women had been separated from men, and converge around a few details in which we can have some confidence” (260–61).

Sundquist further notes that while many later reports identify the woman as a well-known Warsaw dancer named Franceska Mann, “Ota Kraus and Erich Kulka, Polish political prisoners who provided one of the earliest descriptions of Auschwitz in *The Death Factory* (1946), identified her as a woman named Horowitz who, acting with a business magnate named Mazur, was a conduit for the false passports” (261). However Jiří Holý, referencing Amann and Aust (2013), notes that this mistakenly assumes that the woman’s birth, and stage, names represent two different individuals.

In actual fact, this woman’s name was Franziska Mann, stage name Lola Horovitz (Amann/Aust 2013). She was born in 1917, was a dancer and began her career in Warsaw before the war. ... She was imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto, and later, like

other prominent Jews, interned in Hotel Polski and in Bergen-Belsen. (Holý 2016, 240)

Kirsty Chatwood points out that other sources provide alternative identifications of the woman: “Ukrainian survivor-witness Petro Mirchuk refers to the woman as a ‘Greek Jewish girl [who] was a dancer and physically fit.’ K. T. Czelny describes the woman as a Polish-Jewish actress and places the event on the unloading ramp in Auschwitz Birkenau” (Chatwood 2010, 63–4). One more recent literary response to the event – Jacqueline Osherov’s poem “Brief Encounter With a Hero, Name Unknown, by Rosa” – as its title makes clear, rests content with the act itself and does not attempt to establish the identity of the woman who carried it out (the poem is included in Osherov’s 1996 collection *With a Moon in Transit*). Osherov had heard an account of the event from her father, a Holocaust survivor in charge of delousing at Birkenau (account from Drew Brown 2004–5, np). It is worth drawing attention to the fact that the poem highlights our lack of knowledge about the woman’s motives, considering various possibilities but stressing that we will never know the truth. It thus stands in sharp contrast to Arnošt Lustig’s account.

Lustig’s novel *A Prayer for Katerina Horovitzova* follows the fate of the group of prisoners to which the woman belonged in the final days of their lives. From early on in the narrative, it is primarily Katerina Horovitzova’s perceptions through which the reader is led to witness events, but she is also seen from the outside, as if by another character but actually in the way, familiar to readers, in which fictional third-person, so-called omniscient narrators present their characters.

Katerina Horovitzova ran her hands along her hips unconsciously, as though she were

about to try on the new suit. She still hadn't quite absorbed how all this had happened, but now she was concentrating on immediate needs. She was prepared to act the part of an experienced and famous dancer as she had at first when she had been left alone for a few moments with Mr Herman Cohen. (Lustig 1990, 5)

Here there is a clear shift through (i) the character as she might have been seen by a fellow prisoner, (ii) the information provided by the omniscient narrator that her gesture is unconscious, and (iii) her conscious mental state of preparation for the part she intends to play. Lustig's choice of narrative perspective allows him to present aspects of the woman's mental processes and physical behaviour of which she herself is unaware. On the one hand this allows us to feel that we know her more fully, but on the other hand it places the reader in a relationship with her that is not a normal human one and that in its reach implies a sort of power: for the reader nothing about Katerina is hidden, not even those aspects of herself of which she is unaware.

Shortly after this passage, the reader is taken directly into her internal rehearsal of what she knows about the men she is accompanying.

Apparently the gentlemen with the American passports had not known each other very well before. There had been two thousand of them to start with, not just twenty, but (and this they had been told in Italy, which is where they had come from) the competent American authorities were mainly interested in these twenty wealthy gentlemen. (5)

The first word here evokes Katerina's attribution of these details to sources that she appears

to be unwilling to trust absolutely. This passage involves a sort of floating focalization, by means of which an extradiegetic narrator presents the reader with the character's unspoken knowledge. "Knowledge" rather than "thoughts": the woman will not have thought to herself "this we were told in Italy, which is where they had come from." The artificiality of the passage is that it requires the reader to accept that Katerina is rehearsing this knowledge to herself when there seems no clear reason why she should do this; it transfers the need to convey information that is the narrator's to the character, without providing her with a convincing motivation so to do.

Even though these early sequences are undramatic, there is already a sense that Katerina – a fictional character representing, remember, a real person (or, perhaps better, a real person inserted into a fictional account) – is thoroughly known to the narrator and to us, left with no core of a private self to which only she has access. The narrator has access, too, to the inner selves of other characters. A page later, the reader is told what the expression of a tailor "might have been disguising," with the added comment that "he was probably envious" (6), suggesting that the narrator is not completely omniscient, and has to guess at this information. But the paragraph following opens with the words, "Thousands, even hundreds of thousands, no, millions of people, the tailor thought to himself" (6), and the reader no longer has to rest satisfied with probabilities or guesswork, but is granted certain knowledge of what is going through the tailor's mind. Ironically, then, this account of a heroic act by a doomed individual, an act that testifies to the fact that her disempowerment is not quite absolute and that there is some part of her spirit that remains unsubdued and unsuspected by her captors, leaves nothing of her public or private self undisclosed to the reader. At the same time, the displayed omniscience serves to anonymize and depersonify the narrator, who is drawn away from the specific identity of the author, with the author's special experiences, to

become like so many other all-knowing narrators: a ghostly, hardly human observer, capable of penetrating into the deepest recesses of his characters' consciousnesses.

In the scene culminating in the actual shooting at the end of the novel these issues come to a head. Is the reader to be told exactly what the dancer's thoughts are as she kills Schillinger, or is her act to stand as its own record of her defiance? Lustig depicts events from the outside as the SS man forces the woman to take off her underclothes, and then presents the reader not with the woman's thoughts, but with Schillinger's, as she hits him in the eyes with the hooks of her brassiere.

Lieutenant Schillinger couldn't react, either with amazement or by fighting back. He had been entirely unprepared for the blow he had been struck. Eyes blinded by stinging tears, he could feel Katerina Horovitzova yanking the pistol out of his open holster. It felt as though it were happening far away. He groped for the gun but it was gone and she shot him in the stomach. (152)

The narrative presents the woman's sensations and thoughts only after the second shot that wounds the other German has been fired. "She could feel her heart beat, but she had heard nothing. Not even the dry crack of the bullet. She simply understood and killed. And it wasn't at all as impossible as it had seemed all her life or even at the moment she was pulling the trigger" (152). There is a further, brief presentation of the woman's sensations as she feels the cold body of another prisoner and the dampness in the gas chamber, and then the doors are opened and the prisoners machine-gunned.

Were this a purely made-up account including only fictional characters and events, we might say that this scene is well imagined and presented. It captures convincingly the way in

which, at moments of crisis and extreme experience, consciousness closes down all unnecessary awarenesses and concentrates only upon a brutally pared-down selection of mental perceptions and processes. But this is the account of an event that, although part of a work of prose fiction, is based on an actual event and real historical individuals, two of whom are given the names of their historical counterparts. Other readers must decide for themselves, but my own reaction on reading this scene was that of ethical uneasiness: when we cannot know for sure what was going through the mind of the historical individual concerned, what right have we to imagine it?

The two shorter works I will now consider both utilize a character-narrator, in each case one presumably based to some extent on the author and drawing on his or her experiences in Auschwitz. Tadeusz Borowski's "The Death of Schillinger" is very short, just over a thousand words long and thus shorter even than that section of Lustig's novel that deals with the shooting of the SS officer. The story opens as follows.

Until 1943, First Sergeant Schillinger performed the duties of Lagerführer, or chief commanding officer of labour sector 'D' at Birkenau, which was part of the enormous complex of large and small concentration camps, centrally administered from Auschwitz, but scattered throughout Upper Silesia.

Schillinger was a short, stocky man. He had a full, round face and very light blond hair, brushed flat against his head. His eyes were blue, always slightly narrowed, his lips tight, and his face was usually set in an impatient grimace. He cared little about personal appearance, and I have never heard of an incident involving his being bribed by any of the camp "bigwigs". (Borowski 1976, 143)

The use of the first-person pronoun and the reference to the narrator's access to personal testimonies establishes that not only does he have the sort of information about the camp system that a historian might be expected to possess, and which is provided in the opening paragraph, but he also has knowledge of Auschwitz in general and Schillinger in particular that has been gained from first-hand experience and the reports of others with such experience. At the same time, it is notable that this personal connection does not render his account less objective or more emotional; indeed the telling throughout the story is characterized by a distanced, at times almost laconic, tone that is typical of Borowski's stories. Even when reporting Schillinger's viciousness, the failure to detail the narrator's emotions is striking: "His arm could strike a blow as hard as a metal bar; he could crack a jaw or crush the life out of a man with no apparent effort" (143–4). Moreover in contrast to the narrative of Lustig's novel, Borowski's teller stresses the uncertainty adhering to reports of Schillinger's death.

In August 1943, we heard the news that Schillinger had died suddenly in some very unusual circumstances. Various allegedly truthful but in fact conflicting versions of the incident circulated around the camp. I myself was inclined to believe the *Sonderkommando* foreman who, sitting on my bunk one afternoon while waiting for a shipment of evaporated milk to come in from the gypsy camp warehouses, told me the following story about the death of First Sergeant Schillinger ... (144)

The narrator, in other words, rather than seeking to underline the reliability of his own account, reminds the reader not just that it is one that is second-hand, but that it is merely the

most likely to be true of a number of conflicting reports. The mention of the awaited shipment of evaporated milk, in its trivial and insignificant detail, somehow adds to the narrator's credibility, while also serving to characterize him as a matter-of-fact and reliable reporter.

The *Sonderkommando* foreman's story is not given as a complete, unbroken narrative, but interspersed with what can only be described as chatty details in the exchange between the two men. After lighting a cigarette, the foreman proceeds with his story.

“So, if you get the picture, my friend, we had the Będzin transport on our hands.

These Jews, they knew very well what was coming. The *Sonderkommando* boys were pretty nervous too; some of them came from those parts. There have been cases of meeting relatives or friends. I myself had ...”

“I didn't know you came from around there ... Can't tell by the way you talk.”

“I once took a teacher's training course in Warsaw. About fifteen years ago, I reckon. Then I taught at the Będzin school. I had an offer to go abroad, but I didn't want to go. Family and all that. So there you are ... ” (145; all ellipses in original)

The passage is shocking not only because of the picture it paints of non-stop, industrialized mass murder, but also of the way this backdrop has come to be accepted by the two characters as part of a familiar quotidian reality that can be referred to without emotion, and dropped momentarily while a discussion about regional accents and place of origin takes place. One of the most chilling points in the account comes at the end of the first quoted paragraph, as the foreman's account concludes with an ellipsis. There is an ambiguity attached to this ellipsis. It could represent the break in the foreman's story caused by the



narrator's interruption, but the text leaves open the possibility that the foreman leaves his sentence uncompleted because he realizes that the information he is about to give involves a time when he found himself responsible for gassing his own relatives or friends, something that on reflection he would rather keep to himself. If so, it is worth underlining the fact that while the story may hint at this possibility, it does not display the foreman's private thoughts.

The account of the shooting of Schillinger is minimalist. In Borowski's account, the group awaiting gassing were not, as in Lustig's version, ignorant of their impending fate, and thus for the *Sonderkommando* the operation was a "restless" one, to use his own euphemism. As a result, the foreman explains, Schillinger had drawn his revolver.

"But everything would have gone smoothly except that Schillinger had taken a fancy to a certain body – and, indeed, she had a classic figure. That's what he had come to see the chief about, I suppose. So he walked up to the woman and took her by the hand. But the naked woman bent down suddenly, scooped up a handful of gravel and threw it in his face, and when Schillinger cried out in pain and dropped his revolver, the woman snatched it up and fired several shots into his abdomen. The whole place went wild. The naked crowd turned on us, screaming. The woman fired once again, this time at the chief, wounding his face. Then the chief as well as the S.S. men made off, leaving us quite alone. But we managed, thank God. We drove them all right into the chamber with clubs, bolted the doors and called the S.S. to administer Cyclone B. After all, we've had time to acquire some experience." (145–6)

It is worth setting this account against that given by eye-witness Filip Müller, who reports that following the shooting of Schillinger those prisoners who were not gassed were machine-

gunned by the SS, and who does not attribute to the *Sonderkommando* the active role that Borowski does. Müller concludes his account by reporting that “the body of the young dancer was laid out in the dissecting room of crematorium 2,” and that “SS men went there to look at her corpse before its incineration,” perhaps as a warning “of the dire consequences one moment’s lack of vigilance might have for an SS man” (Müller 1999, 89).

The foreman’s attribution of responsibility for the killing of the group of prisoners to the *Sonderkommando* accords neither with Müller’s nor other first-hand reports of the murders.<sup>1</sup> This shift of responsibility conveys a message found repeatedly in the stories contained in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* – the widely available Penguin Books selection of Borowski’s Auschwitz stories in English translation – that the moral degradation of Auschwitz infected everyone, prisoners and perpetrators alike. As with other stories in this collection, the bleakness of this particular short piece is attached both to the detailed accounts of murder that it contains, but also to the way in which those administering the killings, from perpetrators such as Schillinger and prisoners such as the foreman and the narrator who are forced to assist the perpetrators, are seen to, as it were, normalize the process of mass murder, as if their humanity is numbed by the scale of the outrage against humanity. More: the message seems not just to be that one can get used to anything, but that in time the Jews in the *Sonderkommando* did their best to run the murder machine if not enthusiastically then certainly effectively. The foreman’s account implies regret that everything did not go “smoothly,” and it depicts the woman’s action more as an unfortunate failure of procedure than a brave and heroic action. Given the bravery of those in the

---

<sup>1</sup> See the brief online account at

<<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/revolt/sonderevolt.html>>.

*Sonderkommando* who did revolt, “The Death of Schillinger” raises pressing ethical questions for the reader. It may well be that Borowski believed that his fictional account accorded with a non-fictional report that was most likely to be true, but the story’s attribution of part-responsibility for this particular set of murders to the Jewish members of the *Sonderkommando*, its depiction of the moral indifference of the foreman to this fact, and the foreman’s claim that the *Sonderkommando* attempted to carry out the murders efficiently, should not be allowed to stand unchallenged given that these aspects of the story may be taken by readers to represent historical fact.

The foreman’s story ends with his account of bearing the wounded Schillinger to a car, while the dying man keeps groaning through clenched teeth “*O Gott, mein Gott, was hab’ ich getan, dass ich so leiden muss?*”, which means – O God, My God, what have I done to deserve such suffering?”<sup>2</sup> (146). The foreman and the narrator then comment on the “strange irony of fate” that Schillinger “didn’t understand even to the very end” (146). The story ends with a brief paragraph told from the perspective of a much later time, reporting the fact that shortly before the final evacuation of the camp, the *Sonderkommando*, anticipating liquidation, staged a revolt but were machine-gunned by the SS, killing “every one – without exception” (145).

What about the minimalist presentation of the dancer and of her action? Can we say that Lustig’s novel accords her more respect through its more detailed presentation of her

---

<sup>2</sup> There is, perhaps, a faint echo of Christ’s words on the cross: “And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Matthew 27:46, King James Bible. If so, this compounds the “strange irony of fate” many times.

character, thoughts and actions? All that remains of her in Borowski's account is her attractiveness, her effect on the foreman, and her shooting of the two Germans. Does this betoken a lack of regard for the real-life individual upon whose actions these fictional accounts are based? I don't think that there is a single, definitive answer to these questions, but my own reaction to Borowski's story suggests that such a criticism would be undeserved. The story respects the fact that what went through the woman's mind in the final moments of her life was hers and hers alone, and can never be recaptured. Her act alone survives, and remembering her act is the most that can be done to honour her memory.

There is another, more ethically problematic point to be made. In representing this act of defiance, there is a strong impulse to give greater priority to the feelings and thoughts of the victim(s) than to those of the perpetrators. The victims are those who deserve our concern, while the perpetrators merit only our hatred and disdain. And yet to understand the Holocaust it is the feelings, thoughts, motivations and rationalizations of the perpetrators that we most need to try to comprehend. How can we stop people today thinking the sort of thoughts, having the sort of mind set, that the story attributes to Schillinger? But what Borowski's story tells us about this one perpetrator is again bleak. It suggests that he feels no guilt, no sense of having deserved his fate, no ability to use his own suffering to appreciate the suffering he has caused others. It suggests, in short, that perhaps we should cease to try to understand the perpetrators and their present-day successors, and concentrate rather on opposing and defeating them without seeking to explore the unplumbable depths of their inner lives.

Sara Nomberg-Przytyk's story "Revenge of a Dancer" is, by about 40 words, even shorter than Borowski's "The Death of Schillinger." Like Borowski's story it uses a character-

narrator who learns of the shooting at second hand, but several key details in the story are different from all other accounts of the event, and the shooting actually serves as something of a backdrop to another, more dramatically immediate story that involves a “young girl.” As is the case with Borowski’s Auschwitz stories, the precise status of Nomberg-Przytyk’s “true tales from a grotesque land” is not easy to fix: they are clearly not wholly fictional, not purely invented stories about imagined people and events. They most certainly depend on knowledge the author gained either directly or from others during her time as an Auschwitz prisoner, and they have been marketed in such a way as to ensure that the reader is aware of the author’s personal history. But at the same time they differ from the documentary accounts given by writers such as Müller and Kogon. Some discussions of “Revenge of a Dancer” refer to the narrator of the story as “Sara,” thus identifying her with the real-life author, and by implication categorizing the story as history rather than fiction. As the narrator is given no name in the story I have not given her one either, as to do so seems to me removes an uncertainty about the fictionality of the tale that may well be intended. In their afterword to the English translation of Nomberg-Przytyk’s stories, Eli Pfefferkorn and David H. Hirsch suggest that “Revenge of a Dancer” may be based on another incident than that mentioned in the accounts of Eugen Kogon, Wieslaw Kielar and Borowski, but similar to it. This seems unlikely, but it is possible that her story builds on two separate incidents, one involving the shooting of Schillinger, and another in which a German soldier helps to save the “young girl” at the unloading platform on to which prisoners disembarked from the train that had brought them to the camp.

As in Borowski’s story, Nomberg-Przytyk’s “Revenge of a Dancer” moves from a short opening paragraph that provides contextualizing information, to a second paragraph that homes in on the “particular July night” during which the story to be recounted took place.

This movement (in narrative terms, one from the iterative to the singulative) is very common in Holocaust accounts: the context of Auschwitz is so extraordinary that some sense of the normalizing of horror that daily existence in the camp involved has to be provided for readers before a particular character or event is introduced.

During the summer of 1944 the transports used to arrive at Auschwitz at night as well as in the daytime. We often woke up because of the shouting of the SS men, the barking of dogs, the whistling of trainmen, the stamping of hundreds of feet, and the cries of desperation in different languages. At night the atrocities combined with our sleeplessness to give us a very vivid sense of existing in a factory of death. And yet, it all appeared unreal. (107)

In a strange way the narrator's description of bearing witness to the sufferings of those about to die at a distance mirrors that of the reader of accounts of Auschwitz, for whom the knowledge that these depicted people and events were real merges with a sense that they are so extreme that they cannot but appear dreamlike and unreal. The use of the iterative here also has a numbing, if not quite normalizing effect. It is not just on one night that this happened, but every night. That which should be remarkable – cries of desperation – becomes common and familiar. Geoffrey Hill's poem "September Song," about a young Holocaust victim, captures something of this appalling process of normalization in the phrase "so many routine cries," where the force of "so many" oscillates between "such an appallingly large number" and "just the number that was planned for and expected," such that that which should be exceptional – a cry – has become routine (Hill 1968, 19).

But this particular July night something different is heard. "Suddenly the air was

shattered by a series of shots, and then you could hear the sound of someone running. Then more shots, more shouts, and lamentations” (107). The narrator follows her “usual custom” and goes to the infirmary, at the gate of which she meets a fellow-prisoner named Marusia who urges her to come quickly and enter the building, as a decision on what to do is needed. Once she does so, the two of them meet a young girl who had been found by Marusia earlier, naked except for a rag taken from the wall of the barrack, and who she had taken inside. The young girl then tells her story, just as in Borowski’s tale the foreman tells his story to the narrator.

This story traces the journey of five hundred men, women and children who were first well treated, but once the train had crossed into Poland experienced brutality from the leaders of the convoy. Her account continues:

“When we reached Auschwitz there was nobody at the station. It seems that nobody expected us at that hour. It was dark and quiet. In my compartment there were women with children and a young dancer from Paris. She was an unusually beautiful woman, very pleasant and courteous. She helped the mothers keep the children amused. Since it was very hot, we all wore bathing suits. The dancer was wearing a two-piece suit. We were all very tired from the long trip, so we dozed as we waited to leave the cars. (108)

They are then told by a sleepy SS man to strip naked, and leave all their possessions in the train, and when they question this, he starts hitting them with the rifle butt. They are then chased outside the train by SS men with dogs.

The dancer, still in her bathing suit, was walking next to me. She was the only one who did not get undressed. An SS man, apparently the commandant of the guards, approached her. “Beautiful girl, take off your suit,” he said quietly, coming closer and closer to her. Then, all of a sudden, with a rapid movement, she grabbed the pistol out of his holster and shot straight at him. After that, she took three steps backward and shot at the SS men who were running all over the place. She saved the last bullet for herself. (108–9)

Following this, the young girl recounts how, in the *mêlée* following the shooting, a German soldier grabs her hand, throws a dress in her direction, and brings her to the infirmary, leaving her there without a word.<sup>3</sup> The story ends as follows.

This was the story of the young French girl. We listened to the story as if we were hearing the most beautiful music.

“That’s how you’re supposed to die,” said Magda.

We did not discuss the subject further. That day a French girl died in the camp. Our arrival from the night transport was given her number and her name. Who was the German soldier who had saved a young Jewish girl’s life? We never found out. (109)

In contrast to Borowski’s “The Death of Schillinger,” Nomborg-Przytyk’s story ends on a

---

<sup>3</sup> There is a slight tension between the claim that the girl when found was naked except for a rag, and the report that the soldier had thrown a dress in her direction.



note that, while by no means optimistic, is positive. The dancer acts bravely and kills one of the perpetrators, thus showing “how you’re supposed to die”; a German soldier risks his own life and succeeds in saving a young girl from the gas chamber; and those who hear the story listen as if hearing the most beautiful music. If this ending might seem to give an unrealistic account of the encouragement the shooting of the SS man gave to the prisoners who heard about it, Wieslaw Kielar’s telling of the story provides some evidence that backs up Nomberg-Przytyk’s account.

The incident passed on from mouth to mouth and embellished in various ways grew into a legend. Without doubt this heroic deed by a weak woman, in the face of certain death, gave moral support to every prisoner. We realized all at once that if we dared raise a hand against them, that hand might kill; they were mortal, too. (Kielar 1982, 178)

This realization has a positive effect, in spite of the SS men’s attempts to terrorize the camp even more: “prisoners straightened up, hope grew once more. A spontaneous, although still weak, campaign of self-defense was born” (179).

Note that the positive effect of the shooting, charted both in “Revenge of a Dancer” and in Kielar’s account, owes nothing to information about what went through the woman’s mind as she shot the two Germans. For both writers, it would seem, Wittgenstein’s injunction applied: “Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent.” It is here, too, that in Dorrit Cohn’s phrase “the distinction of fiction” has a moral dimension. If fiction has the power to enable readers to experience what it is like to be other people, and to gain access to the interiorities of others in a manner impossible in ordinary existence, this power may need

to be curtailed in mixed forms that incorporate real people and events into fictional narratives. It is not so much whereof we cannot speak, but whereof we should not try to speak.

Arnošt Lustig wrote a second novel that also included a presentation of the shooting of Schillinger: *Colette, A Girl from Antwerp*, published in Czech in successively revised versions in 1992, 2001 and 2005 and made into a film directed by Milan Cieslar in 2013. Jiří Holý has written a critique of this work that lists a number of historical inaccuracies, and that reports Holý's ethical misgivings concerning the novel's mixture of fictional and non-fictional elements. Holý comments that while *A Prayer for Kateřina Horovitzová* compares its title character "with the Biblical character Judith, in *Colette* she is a nameless prostitute and a collaborator of the Gestapo" (240). Holý further notes that Lustig "connected this work [*Colette*] with two other pieces of prose depicting beautiful young women, which were victims of the Nazis and the Holocaust," and that Lustig's later works often record "the stories of young Jewish girls and women [whose] beauty and youth form a moving contrast to the horrors of the Shoah" (Holý 2016, 231, 232). These comments appear to hint at an unease at the depiction of victims who are young, female, beautiful – and subject to fascist male power.

Kirsty Chatwood addresses directly Schillinger's reputation as not just brutal but also sexually predatory.

Reading the multiple, and frequently conflicting, testimonies reveals a subtext of sexual violence, where Schillinger is identified not only as a brutal SS officer but also as a sexual predator. At the same time, the dancer's sexuality is itself presented as a

source of power since, as a story of resistance, the key point is the way in which the dancer uses her sexual identity to lull the SS officer into a false sense of his own masculine superiority. By displaying her femininity to disarm and kill him, she is effectively reversing the rape narrative. (Chatwood 2010, 61)

These comments by Holý and Chatwood raise troubling questions for the reader, questions that have to be considered independently for each account – fictional or non-fictional – of the event. I find Holý's specific response to Lustig's two narratives more telling than Chatwood's when it comes to *A Prayer for Kateřina Horovitzová*, although to do Chatwood justice her comments are applied to all the “multiple, and frequently conflicting, testimonies” of the event. But other testimonies also raise worrying questions about voyeuristic elements in narratives of Schillinger's death. *Sonderkommando* member Zalmen Gradowski's “The Czech Transport: A Chronicle of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando*” (1988 but written in 1944), for example, appears to be the earliest written report of the shooting of Schillinger, for which the author expresses admiration. And yet this same account contains deeply troubling descriptions of women who knew they were about to die asking for sex from members of the *Sonderkommando*, accounts that however ethically pure Gradowski's motives, allow or invite the male reader to adopt a voyeuristic point of view that involves experiencing the power of the fascist male gaze. If such a possibility can also be found in Lustig's two novels about the event, it is absent from Borowski's and Nomberg-Przytyk's narratives. This absence is not the result of a refusal to depict the inner workings of the consciousness of Schillinger's executioner, but the absence and the refusal share a comparable ethical origin and force.

## Works cited

Amann, Thomas and Aust, Stefan. 2013. *Hitlers Menschenhändler. Das Schicksal der "Austauschjuden"*. Rotbuch Verlag: Berlin.

Booth, Wayne. 1988. *The Company We Keep. An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Borowski, Tadeusz. 1976. *The Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*. Trans. Barbara Vedder. First published in Polish, 1959, and in English, 1967. New York and London: Penguin.

Brown, Drew. 2004–5. "Passionate About Poetry. Distinguished Poet Jacqueline Osherov Finds a Home – and Inspiration – in Utah."

<[https://continuum.utah.edu/back\\_issues/winter04/osherow.htm](https://continuum.utah.edu/back_issues/winter04/osherow.htm)>, accessed July, 2018.

Chatwood, Kirsty. 2010. "Schillinger and the Dancer: Representing Agency and Sexual Violence in Holocaust Testimonies." In Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (eds), *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 61–74.

Cohn, Dorrit. 1999. *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Gradowski, Zalmen. 1988 (written March-April 1944). "The Czech Transport: A Chronicle of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando*." In David G. Roskies (ed.), *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 548–64.

Hawthorn, Jeremy. 2016. *Studying the Novel*. Seventh edn. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Hill, Geoffrey. 1968. *King Log*. London: Andre Deutsch.

Holý, Jiří. 2016. "Arnošt Lustig's *Colette, divka z Antverp* – Between Historical Facts and Fiction." In Reinhard Ibler (ed.), *The Holocaust in the Central European Literatures and Cultures: Problems of Poeticization and Aestheticization*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 231–41.

Kielar, Wieslaw. 1982. *Anus Mundi: Five Years in Auschwitz*. Trans. Susanne Flatauer, from the 1979 German edition. First published in Poland, 1972. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Kogon, Eugen. 2006. *The Theory and Practice of Hell*. First revised edition. Trans. Heinz Norden. First published in English, 1950. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Levi, Primo. 1996. *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*. (Also known in English as *If This is a Man*.) Trans. Stuart Woolf. First published in Italian, 1947, and in English, 1959. New York: Touchstone.

Lothe, Jakob. 2016. *Etikk i Litteratur og Film*. Oslo: Pax Forlag.

Lustig, Arnošt. 1990. *A Prayer for Katerina Horovitzova*. Trans. Jeanne Němcová. First published in English, 1973. London: Quartet Books.

Müller, Filip. *Eye Witness Auschwitz. Three Years in the Gas Chambers*. Trans. Susanne Flatauer. First published in English, 1979. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.

Nomberg-Przytyk, Sara. 1985 *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*. Trans. Roslyn Hirsch. Ed. Eli Pfefferkorn and David M. Hirsch. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.

Struk, Janina. 2004. *Photographing the Holocaust. Interpretations of the Evidence*. London: I. B. Taurus.

Sundquist, Eric J. 2013. "The Historian's Anvil, the Novelist's Crucible." In Alan Rosen (ed.), *Literature of the Holocaust*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 252–67.