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Concentration-Camp Literature from a Comparative Perspective. Initial Remarks

There are few areas in twentieth-century literature as hermetic and seemingly well-defined as Concentration-Camp literature. It is a corpus with thematic unity, but at the same time with very specific formal coordinates, almost a literary genre in itself, which, despite its relatively small numbers, has resulted in undisputed masterpieces of world literature, as well as several Nobel prizes. Primo Levi or Imre Kertész could be mentioned here because, to this day, camp literature is mostly associated with the written testimonies of survivors of Auschwitz or other Nazi concentration camps. However, Jorge Semprún, himself one of the great representatives of this current of writing, once stated that the most outstanding author in this area is the Russian Varlam Shalamov. For many years, survivors and historians alike have been comparing the camps of different totalitarian regimes, especially Nazi and Soviet, and demanding the inclusion of Gulag literature in the conceptual corpus of camp literature. In fact, it was already David Rousset, former Buchenwald prisoner and author of *L'Univers concentrationnaire* (1946), who started this debate in the immediate post-war period. Today, more and more scholars are adopting a broad, inclusive research perspective, although they do not cease to feel the need to justify an approach that places the two great concentration experiments of the twentieth century and their testimonies side by side, as we see, for example, in the preface to the book *Gulag Literature and the Literature of Nazi Camps* by Leona Toker (a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, born in the former Soviet Union). On the other hand, this justification disappears, for example, in *L'expérience concentrationnaire est-elle indicible?* by Luba Jurgenson, another important researcher who deals with this phenomenon. In Poland, where many prominent writers-witnesses of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism lived, with Tadeusz Borowski and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński at the forefront, it was customary to distinguish between lager and gulag literature.

Narrowing the research field to the two great totalitarian blocs, however, is met with opposition from surviving writers-victims of other regimes (from the Chinese *laogai* to the Khmer Rouge experiments in Cambodia), who demand their place in this space. In his book *Escribir el horror. Literatura y campos de concentración* [To Write the Horror. Literature and Concentration Camps], Javier Sánchez Zapatero also includes French camps for Spanish Republican prisoners in his corpus. This procedure is repeated by various authors who bring a certain national perspective to their work on Concentration-Camp literature.

The problem in defining the research area does not lie solely in the colour of the totalitarian system or the characteristics of the collective traumatic experience. The unwritten assumption is that this literature is purely testimonial: it does not so much describe the experience of the camps as survivors must write it. In his programme letter *On Prose*, Shalamov emphasises this point: “The new prose rejects this principle of tourism. The writer is not an observer, a spectator, but a participant in the drama of life; a participant not with the face of a writer, not in the role of a writer.”¹ Despite the passage of years since the worst concentration experiments of the great totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, their negative impact and their unavoidable historical significance are still present among us. Every year, new historians, reporters, relatives of survivors, and writers take up these issues, although the sword of Damocles of lack of legitimacy hangs over them. An important support for some of this work is the post-memory studies initiated by Marianne Hirsch, justifying and giving meaning to the work of survivors’ relatives in the first instance but also, in a much broader approach, to writers of the generations following the time of collective terror. Significantly, for many young people from all over the world, the gateway to knowledge of Auschwitz was and is the comic strip *Maus. A Survivor’s Tale* by Art Spiegelman rather than *If this Is a Man* by Primo Levi. Contemporary Russian language literature has also flourished in recent years with literary works reckoning with the not-so-distant past – from Guzel Yakhina’s postmemory novel (*Zuleikha*) to Sasha Filipenko’s fiction based on true events (*Red Crosses*): wounds remain open, and not only those of the past, as Putin’s Russia reverts to a highly repressive state.

There are many forms of collective repression and violence that continue to be practised around the world, and new post-traumatic narratives are clamouring for inclusion in the narrow canon of camp literature. Slavenka Drakulić preceded her novel *Kao da me nema* [As If I Am Not There], based on interviews with victims of repeated rape by Serbian soldiers during the war in Bosnia, with epigraphs from Levi and Shalamov, thus claiming the right to include her own narrative in this tradition, and with it testimonies of sexual slavery in a wartime context. Drakulić was not a “participant in the great drama of life”, but S., her main interlocutor, was. In *Return from the Archipelago*, Toker explains how difficult it

¹ В. Шаламов, “О прозе” [in:] *Несколько моих жизней*, Издательство “Республика”, Москва 1996, p. 429.

is for victims to report on certain taboo experiences, those happening in the so-called “Room 101”, which points to the importance and even necessity of the agency of the writer-reporter. This type of endeavour was pioneered by Zofia Nałkowska in *Medallions*, a book that is read in Polish schools alongside Borowski’s short stories. And yet these authors obviously remain in two different categories: reportage and testimony. But what is the arithmetic by which this difference and the many other tensions that exist within and around this genre could be described? What, then, are the boundaries, the contours of camp literature? Should they be redefined to allow for an updated corpus? To these questions, it is worth adding a few others that are related to a comparative perspective in the study of camp literature. Does the national canon of camp literature, determined by the most important testimonies written in a given language (in Polish – Borowski and Herling-Grudziński, in Italian – Levi, in Hungarian – Kertész, in Russian – Shalamov, etc.) determine the local understanding of camp literature, set the rules of the genre? Is a more global view of camp literature, pitting testimonies to geographically and politically distant systems of oppression against each other, justified (opponents may fear equating very separate and peculiar experiences)?

We have encouraged several top specialists to take up the mentioned issues in articles written in Polish or English. We begin the issue with two authors who have devoted several books to our subject. First, the eminent Sorbonne professor Luba Jurgenson presents a very interesting essay, *What We Learn from Comparison: Some Epistemological Remarks*, in which she considers the applicability of a comparatist perspective to camp (nazi lager and Gulag) literature and reflects on the validity and even the need to compare the literatures of the Nazi camps and the Gulag, because, as she states: “comparatism helps with responding to its blind spots. Comparing the bodies of work on Nazi camps and on Soviet camps is tantamount to seeing how one might illuminate the other.” This methodological article is a perfect opening for further discussion. On the other hand, Leona Toker – also a well-known figure in the field of this research – takes on a narrow topic that is rarely studied but, in our view, extremely important, namely poetry recitations in the camps and the impact of these practices on camp literature. In her article *The Theme of Poetry Recital in Concentration-Camp Literature: Shalamov, Semprún, and Other Witnesses*, she analyzes the significance of poetry recitations using examples of various writer-witnesses, both in their camp experiences and in the texts. Also writing in English is University of Barcelona professor and author of a recent book on camp literature (reviewed in this issue), Marisa Siguan. In her article *Kertész versus Semprún: On the Aesthetic Mediability of Violence*, she reflects on the different ways in which the two writers have portrayed violence.

We close the main section with articles by two Polish authors who address specific and detailed topics related to various Polish camp experiences. Prominent Polish researcher of camp literature and professor at the University of Łódź Arkadiusz Morawiec, who has just published a monograph on Polish camp literature

(also reviewed in our issue, of course), offers an article entitled “*Wyimaginowane twory*”? *Obóz Pracy w Łambinowicach według Janusza Rudnickiego* [“Imaginary Beings”? Labor Camp in Łambinowice according to Janusz Rudnicki], which offers testimony about this little-known Polish post-war camp for the German population. As Morawiec states, “Rudnicki’s work also testifies to the fact that Polish camp literature is not limited, as was thought for years, only to nazi lagers and gulags. It also includes Polish camps.” The main block of our issue also included an interesting article by Aleksandra Kumala, “*Tak jak mężczyzna mężczyznę zrozumie...*”: *Męsko-męskie relacje seksualne w narracjach obozowych Augusta Kowalczyka* [“Just like a Man Will Understand a Man...”: (Homo)sexual Relations in August Kowalczyk’s Camp Narratives], which focuses on the expression of “gendered” experiences in Polish lager discourse. The author combines approaches specific to Holocaust studies and gender studies.

The issue additionally includes a vivid discussion about Danuta and Jan Józef Szczepański’s house: *Młyn na Helclów* [A Scrum at the Helclów street]. *Anna Krasnowolska, Katarzyna Kowalczyk and Michał Szczepański in Conversation with Anna Mateja*. It made us very sad to learn that Michał Szczepański died on May 24, 2024, and did not live to see this publication.

The issue also includes texts on new releases related to camp literature. Kazimierz Adamczyk indicates the advantages and few shortcomings of Arkadiusz Morawiec’s monograph *Polska literatura obozowa. Rekonesans* [Polish Concentration Camp Literature. A Reconnaissance], Kertész translator and essayist Adan Kovacsics reviews Marisa Siguan’s collection of short essays on camp writers *La memoria de la violencia* [The Memory of Violence], Grzegorz Siwor engages in a dialogue with Konstanty Gebert’s monumental book *Ostateczne rozwiązania. Ludobójcy i ich dzieło* [The Final Solutions: Genocidaires and Their Work]. In the reviews section, you will also find texts: Agnieszka Bielak on Monika Anna Noga’s dissertation, *Stanisław Brzozowski w kręgu “Kultury” paryskiej* [Stanisław Brzozowski in the Circle of Parisian *Kultura*], Anna Szawerna-Dyrzka on Magdalena Amroziewicz monograph *Poza krąg Kwadrygi. Światopogląd poetycki Władysława Sebyły i Lucjana Szenwalda* [Beyond Kwadryga Group. The Poetic Worldview of Władysław Sebyła and Lucjan Szenwald], and Małgorzata Zemła on Magdalena Brodacka-Dwojak’s book *Środkowoeuropejczyk – gatunek na wymarciu? Narracje tożsamościowe na wybranych przykładach prozy czeskiej i polskiej XX i XXI wieku* [The Central European – a Species on the Decline? Identity Narratives on Selected Examples of Czech and Polish Prose of the 20th and 21st Centuries].

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