

On the testimony of the Holocaust in literature and ethics

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Abstract

In the article, the author analyses the impact of the tragic experiences during the Holocaust on contemporary ethics and literature. Such considerations coincide with yet another anniversary – the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp, celebrated globally as Holocaust Memorial Day. The article also considers the reasons why testimonies from Holocaust survivors have not had an adequate impact on society. The author argues that trivialisation of the Holocaust tragedy occurred in modern science and it is related to the fact that traditional ethics has not been able to convincingly explain why the Holocaust occurred in the most civilised nations. Thus, Holocaust testimonies should be constantly popularised in society for the good of all mankind. Literature seems to be the best form of mass media for this task and it is also a recorder of human emotions. According to the author, it is essential that humanity is protected this way against the possibility of a similar tragedy occurring in the future.

Keywords: Holocaust, ethics, literature, Itzhak Katzenelson, Holocaust Memorial Day

Introduction

The Holocaust can hardly be analysed scientifically, because this greatest tragedy in the history of humanity took place in agreement with law. Paradoxically it was sanctioned by the entire machine of the German state, existing legally and widely accepted in the world. No one expected then, that a civilised state and its society could lose its humanity. In political reality based on mathematics and economy there was no room for ordinary human empathy and support for the weak which is referred to in all ethics. Moreover, it is clear that the science of Nazi Germany was also harnessed to implement and justify this criminal idea. Earlier Germany had set an example to other nations in the rule of law. The existing positive stereotype of exemplary German order may have been the reason why the victims could have been perceived by some as themselves being guilty of their fate. This perception of the fate of the Jews may have been strengthened by some religions and treated as a punishment for real or imaginary sins. Unfortunately, it is obvious that ethics was a failure while the mad plan to annihilate the entire Jewish nation was being implemented. Not only could ethics stop the tormentors, but using pseudo-scientific arguments it even offered the executioners a kind of self-justification.

The history of humanity is written according to events that affect its course. It is no accident that most of these events are associated with human weaknesses or aggression. The history of humanity is a history of wars, atrocities and the fall of human great ideals. Until World War II, people were convinced that history involved the progress of humanity measured by subsequent civilisational advances facilitating life. The idea of humanism seemed indisputable and it appeared to validate faith in this progress. However, the Holocaust is a breach in history understood in this light. It is an event which cannot only be explained, but can even be understood. Today, 75 years after the liberation of the Auschwitz camp, which was a real factory of death, it is worth reflecting on the conclusions which can be drawn by humanity from this tragedy. A question arises as to what extent we have protected ourselves against similar events reoccurring in the future. This is a task for scholars, especially for historians and philosophers. Historians search for genesis, they describe facts related to specific events. Philosophers must explain why their postulates have been ignored or distorted, violating the idea of progress. Each ethicist must also face the problem of the incompatibility of the

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traditional principles in ethics and the brutal realities of life. Such an analysis must be made but when ethicists cannot cope with this task the problem is even more pronounced. Then someone else has to look for explanations needed by humanity. In the case of the Holocaust, the representatives of art, especially literature seem to have replaced ethicists with various degrees of success.

What is the value today of the memory of the Holocaust for human culture? What should be passed on to future generations? One could assume that descriptions of killing techniques or the Nazi Extermination Plan may be very important based on many studies on this topic. However, what humanity really needs is a symbol which is a warning and which would survive forever. The burnt offering of *Shoah* became such a symbol confirming that a sacrifice was made of people themselves and its meaning cannot be diminished by anyone or anything. In this case, it is not even about whether the sacrifice was accepted, it was more important that the sacrifice was made in the first place. However, no one will render the tragedy of the Holocaust more adequately than the artists who themselves became part of this sacrifice. They were aware that this was going to happen, and yet they did not complain, they did not pity themselves but pitied all the others who the Holocaust had not yet destroyed.

On the Holocaust testimonies

The crucial thing about the Holocaust now is that the memory of the genocide, as seen by direct witnesses, is constantly present in our culture. Therefore, it is worth considering why this task was not fulfilled by the direct witnesses of the Holocaust; instead historians researching the Holocaust have often interpreted the accounts of bystanders or from the perpetrators themselves, i.e. the executioners. So, where does the silence of the direct witnesses come from? It seems that the answer to this question can be found in the comment of the former Auschwitz prisoner Stanisław Kłodziński, who divided the survivors into three groups (Kłodziński, 1984, p. 20):

- The first group included those who became hyperactive after the war and devoted themselves completely to work and social activities. Their hyperactivity can be perceived as a form of repayment of the metaphysical guilt that they managed to survive, while such a chance was not given to their relatives and acquaintances.
- The second group is those who absorbed themselves in work alone, as if they wanted to fill every moment with their commitment, so as not to have time to ponder the past. Their work was not creative, it did not give them any satisfaction, but it was basically a desperate attempt to escape from inhuman times which were haunting them from the past.
- The third group is made up of maladjusted and permanently injured people, and their common feature is that they could not form social relations or were unable to live independently.

However, the hell of the Holocaust was usually survived by the strongest mentally and physically. This is why this division can by no means relate to all people who have had very traumatic experiences in the past. Survivors generally did not want to talk about their traumas, and if they mentioned anything it was mainly the facts related to others. Therefore, the description of the hell of the Holocaust has to be narrowed, and lacks a psychological background. Trying to learn about the experience from indirect sources, such as medical reports is limited as well. Moreover, such reports are written by people relating to their own personal experience. So, how can a person faithfully recreate the hell of the Holocaust if they have not experienced it? It is not surprising then that in medicine, while dealing with the recognition and recovery of the mental condition of patients, it has long been understood that a dry scientific

description is not enough to learn the etiology of such disorders, and moreover to predict the course of the disorders. Antoni Kępiński, an eminent Polish psychiatrist, wrote: "... not only doctors, but also thinkers and artists contributed to the recognition and judgment of mental diseases and the mentally ill..." (Kępiński, 1979, p. 281). According to this doctor, in psychiatry, the usefulness of artistic description and other forms of expression of one's own psychological experiences was due to the greater sensitivity of artists, among whom such disorders occur more often than in other people. Moreover, artists express their experiences in individual, unique ways, which is definitely different from a scientist who uses repetitive research methods. The artist expresses himself by ignoring the standard rules in accordance with scientific knowledge. The artist's statement is authentic, which unlike a scientific description, can also be false.

Therefore, one cannot agree with Alain Badiou who is known for his unconventional attempt to maintain the scientific status of ethics. The introduction of set theory ideas ('ideas of the multiple') to explain axiological problems has its limitations. According to Badiou, there are apparent events that at first glance seem to possess features of events, because being based on ontologically impossible categories (destruction, death or nothingness) cannot be included in the form of philosophical reflection. That is why, for example the Holocaust is not an event, which means that philosophy is not able to put it in the form of an orderly reflection. Thus, it cannot be described in terms of scientific truth, because even the concept of 'a Jew' in the Holocaust does not mean a specific person, but only an image of someone who may have nothing to do with the nation; "... the name 'Jew' was a political creation of the Nazis, without any pre-existing referent. It is a name whose meaning no one can share with the Nazis, a meaning that presumes the simulacrum and fidelity to the simulacrum – and hence the absolute singularity of Nazism as a political sequence" (Badiou, 2001, p. 75). Thus, neither contemporary literature nor philosophy can today adequately comment on the Holocaust. Such a justification for the silence of ethics on the greatest crime in the history of humanity clearly does not correspond to its thesis about individual crimes, such as the murder of Caesar by Brutus. Badiou's reasoning therefore contains the idea of mathematised or maybe physiced ethics. He is closer to analytical philosophy than to the ordinary man troubled with doubts. Since the understanding of concepts is blurred, the fact to which they relate also becomes unrealistic.

Hannah Arendt tackled this problem in her famous work *Eichman in Jerusalem. A Report of the Banality of Evil*, where she stated that the testimony of Holocaust executioners had all the features of a theatre play. The main character is the torturer, and the victims are basically just the background in this performance. This theatre had a specific purpose, which Arendt quoted after the organisers of the Eichmann trial: "it is necessary that our youth remember what happened to the Jewish people. We want them to know the most tragic facts in our history", because "the generation of Israelis who have grown up since the "holocaust" were in danger of losing their ties with the Jewish people" (Arendt, 1977, p. 10). Thus, the theatre was to become a history lesson, which, could cause the tragedy of the Holocaust to seem unreal. The truth should not be told by torturers, i.e. by those who have not experienced the Holocaust atrocities as victims even if they repented and apologised for their crimes. It was all an immanent part of the play played in this theatre. In general, it was only a history lesson for Jews living in Israel. For other countries the meaning of the Eichmann trial was insignificant. Due to such theatrical political performances, the Holocaust could become a local rather than a global event. Without an ethical message that is clear to all the inhabitants of our planet, this niche of the Holocaust would increase. It is quite possible that were it not for the anti-Semitic finale of student unrest in March 1968, in Poland, as well as similar events in other European countries, the memory of the Holocaust would only be preserved today in Israel and in Jewish diasporas scattered around the world. After all, these events resulted in dire consequences. In the case of Poland, it was a

wave of forced emigration of people of Jewish descent. The threat of anti-Jewish speeches in civilised Europe has become real again and the hatred once ignited by the Nazis still smoulders. The horrors from the past that everyone would like to forget still glow.

The powerlessness of ethics against total evil

For scientific reasons to be effective they must be presented and published in a way accessible to the recipient of the message. Ethics is not practiced only for its own sake, but has a specific task to shape people's attitudes in such a way that they do as little evil as possible in the world. Therefore, such a corrective function of ethics means that every new event not based on legal or moral regulations should be taken into ethical consideration in such a way that the evil will not occur again. Here, the question arises why post-war ethics did not fulfill this task. A possible answer is that scientific ethics has its roots in German philosophy which enabled it to legitimise the Holocaust. An attempt to fulfill the corrective function would have to involve a review of the foundations of the whole of ethics, but none of the contemporary ethics seemed to be able or willing to fulfill this task. The only thing that contemporary ethics managed to do was to shift the focus of ethical considerations from German philosophy to analytical philosophy, which focused the theory on metaethical considerations safe for ethicists themselves because they did not require any revisions or resolutions. The failure of contemporary ethics to hold humanity responsible for the tragedy of the Holocaust means that this task must be fulfilled by art, and specifically by literature which seems to be the most accessible to everyone.

Historical and literary accounts record the words and emotions of those who survived. However, in science, the problem is generally described based on what others have experienced. Thus, crimes tend to be described by the perpetrators themselves, because their victims are usually dead. Demonstrating the victim's point of view requires empathy from the scientist and artist or alternatively writing a terse description of what happened which can be read in the available records. Little could be learnt from the so-called survivors of the Holocaust. Memory discontinuity in people who have experienced traumatic experiences is well known in psychiatry. The survivors had lost everything, not only their relatives, but also their own homes, sentimental items and everything associated with their previous lives. They struggled to express what they had experienced because they were short for adequate words. It was much easier for them to express their emotions in the form of artistic expression that was not restricted to scientific rules. The literary work of Tadeusz Borowski is a good example where the writer managed to boldly express in his works his own feelings in a naturalistic manner. How shocking his description of the feeling of hunger in the concentration camp when he wrote that the hunger was so great that one looked at another other prisoner, not as a second human being, but as something which could be eaten. We also owe Borowski the most accurate specification of the reason for the passivity of people destined for extermination: "Never before in the history of mankind has hope been stronger than man, but never also has it done so much harm as it has in the war, in this concentration camp. We were never taught how to give up hope, and this is why today we perish in gas chambers" (Borowski, 1987, pp. 121–122). Hope is a feeling that never leaves a man who has kept his sense of identity. It cannot be reproduced scientifically. It is the foundation of the existence of religions.

However, there is no rational explanation of the Holocaust. There are only weak attempts to transfer theological considerations into the foundations of humanities and social sciences. Perhaps the distinguished position of the Jewish people in some areas of social life encourages attempts to dispose of them by those who feel undervalued. Thus, competition for dominance, including the physical elimination of competitors would have been considered the basic principle of interpersonal relations. However, this could not have been a mere struggle for existence, because having exterminated the Jewish population, nobody increased their chances of survival, and the torturers themselves had all the means to survive. The lack of a rational

explanation for the Holocaust has been compensated in a limited way by literary descriptions. A special place in literature is certainly reserved for subjects directly related to Jewish culture and religion. It is interesting that the Jews are portrayed in an extremely specific way, because even if they are positive heroes, they are usually portrayed in a negative context. Curiously, mainly people outside the circle of Jewish culture, i.e. those who risked their lives to save the Jews and deserve the diploma and medal of “Righteous Among the Nations” are depicted positively. Such literary one-sidedness means that the Jews have a problem with referring to their own heroes, whose memory they could popularise among other cultures. It is very unfair that people all over the world know the names of the torturers, but only a few know the victims by their names. Thus, the memory of the Holocaust did not become a monument commemorating Jewish achievements but according to some people it can be considered to be a monument commemorating the efficiency of the Nazi executioners.

People who are endangered firstly try to find rescue for themselves. The efficient machine of the Holocaust deprived them of any hope of survival very quickly. Next, the matter of preserving the memory of what is left after those who have died will be on the agenda. The mechanism introduced by Nazis recorded history using statistics, terse date entries or cruel commands. The victims themselves had to write their own testament different from the German one. Yitskhak Schipper told Alexander Donat: “Everything depends on who transmits our testament to future generations, on who writes the history of this period. History is usually written by the victor. What we know about murdered peoples is only what their murderers vaingloriously cared to say about them. Should our murderers be victorious, should they write the history of this war, our destruction will be presented as one of the most beautiful pages of world history, and future generations will pay tribute to them as dauntless crusaders. Their every word will be taken as gospel. Or they may wipe out our memory altogether, as if we had never existed, as if there had never been a Polish Jewry, a ghetto in Warsaw, a Majdanek” (Kassow, 2014, p. 173). Since Yitskhak Schipper was a historian, he was able to organise facts and connect them together coherently. The same work was carried out by Emanuel Ringelblum, who in these dark times, carried out his mission defiantly to document the life and struggle of Polish Jews against the German aggressor. Ringelblum’s Archive contains material meticulously collected by many witnesses of the Holocaust. It is an accusation and warning for future generations, not only for intellectuals but also for ordinary people, even those just waiting for death, that they be aware that the post-war future will decide whether there is a place on Earth for the Jews at all, Alexander Donat’s report confirms this: “Those who worked with Schipper in the kitchen at Majdanek recognized what was at stake in transmitting their history and did everything they could to save him from the gas chamber” (Kugelmass & Boyarin, 1983, p. 17). Yet it was not physical resistance which ultimately decided the failure of the great extermination plan. Eventually it was the memory of the victims and not the torturers which survived. If the fate of the war had been different, the Holocaust would have been celebrated by the Nazis as a great victory, after which the memory of the defeated would have been blurred on the pages of history. It is quite possible that for the Nazi architects of the Holocaust this was even more important than the physical elimination of the Jewish people.

On the other hand, ethics as a science, must generalise all individual descriptions and find the common factor. That is why Berel Lang writes: “The history of philosophical ethics is a history of the will for generalisation. Even to recognize individual judgments or acts as ethical requires a move to abstraction in order to catch sight of the principles that give them this character...” (Lang, 2003, p. 62). For this reason, the scientific description of the Holocaust is perceived in some sense as incomprehensible. To explain that something occurred that transcends human understanding may be not be possible. Reflecting more deeply on the impossibility of a scientific interpretation of the Holocaust, a statement can be ventured that the contemporary division of ethics into practical (applied) and theoretical, is the aftermath of this

impossibility. Practical ethics deals only with what is happening currently, i.e. modern dilemmas. According to it, the Holocaust is a historical fact not to be interpreted. If there are any associations, they may be quite grotesque, as for example, equating abortion with the Holocaust. This only trivialises the act of the Nazi genocide, enabling it to be considered in terms of good and evil and thus containing the theoretical possibility of being justified. Berel Lang postulates the theoretical possibility of avoiding a repetition of the Holocaust by formulating an introduction of one universal prohibition based on the model of a categorical imperative. However, a way can be found to circumvent any prohibition and to reinterpret it with the mechanisms the Nazis used to justify their right to exterminate the Jewish people.

The principle of moral progress in traditional ethics had suddenly been destroyed because ethics had not been able to explain the causes of such a sudden moral decline. Berel Lang commented on the present situation in this respect: “the act of genocide was a moral phenomenon, the enormity of which continues to challenge the reasoned and balanced voice in which ethics has traditionally spoken” (Lang, 2003, p. 64).

Literary expression of the impossible

Writing about the Holocaust from the victims’ point of view forces you to reach for explanations that have so far worked well for individual incidents. An explanation of the silence of those who survived the Holocaust can be found in psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud, describing the situation of a man in trauma after losing loved ones wrote: “Profound mourning, the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved, contains the same painful frame of mind, the same loss of interest in the outside world – in so far as it does not recall him – the same loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love (which would mean replacing him) and the same turning away from any activity that is not connected with thoughts of him” (Freud, 1917, p. 243). Therefore, literary works are created not in a state of mourning but melancholy, which does not deprive man of his creative abilities, but only weakens his activity outside.

However, mourning lasts for a relatively short time since by absorbing a person’s total energy it could prevent a normal life. However, the state of melancholia, similar to mourning, has no time limits. Overcoming mourning also requires a fight in which a calculation takes place and ultimately one’s own interest prevails over the loss suffered. Melancholia is about constantly complementing the value of what has been lost. Thus, it involves the continuous expenditure of energy and the constant evaluation of what may have been. Freud also predicted that overcoming melancholy might result in a narcissistic turn for the person. In other words, a person can become introvert and even obsessed because of the loss. And those who survived *Shoah* often experienced that.

This melancholic streak was already observed during the war, and is conveyed in the final fragment of Icchok Kacnelson’s poem “The Song of the Murdered Jewish People”. It was written in 1942 in Warsaw. The author seems to be affected by the soulless extermination of Jews, which was beyond human understanding, in addition to the lack of means which the victims possessed in order to defend themselves as exhibited especially during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. A fight is always about something: for territory, for resources, or to save someone or something. But what could the Jewish insurgents save? They could only delay what seemed inevitable, their mission was suicidal, but their death was not pointless. It was not foreseen in the ‘Final Solution’ It was the first problem in what seemed to be a well-oiled extermination machine. As a result, they became public victims and the memory of them survived because all except those involved in the Final Solution experienced their mourning. This uprising was the essence of Jewish mysticism. Now nobody could tell the Jews that they were not actively trying to influence their fate. However, passive surrender to their fate proved to be just as ineffective as an attempt to influence it actively which in itself could have become a disaster for Jewish culture. After the war, the culture recognised from Singer’s novels or from

the musical *Fiddler on the roof* did not disintegrate but was transformed into an active approach to life typical of Europeans. The history of the state of Israel is the best proof of this.

During World War II no masterpieces were written which could render the tragedy of those times. In addition, this problem could only be tackled by world literature some time after the war ended. The poem entitled “The song of the murdered Jewish people” was written by Izaak Katzenelson (1886–1944) – a witness of Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and an Auschwitz prisoner. [It] “is one of the most powerful diaries to be retrieved from the ashes of the Holocaust. The manuscripts [...] are extant thanks to the efforts of a member of the French underground named Miriam Novitch, who was a prisoner in Vittel at the time when Katzenelson was there in 1943” (Patterson, Berger & Cargas, 2002, p. 87). The background to the poem and how it survived to the present day shows the importance of such memories which can be passed on to future generations. This is also an example of literature being able to render the atmosphere of the times in which it was written.

“The Song of the Murdered Jewish People” is in itself a preview of the new ethics and perception of the world in Jewish culture. Obvious connections with “Jeremiah’s Lament” relate more to the poetic form rather than to the message contained in them. Thus, in poem not only do we have lament over the tragedy which affects innocent people, but we also have a mournful reflection on everything that was lost in the Holocaust. Everything Katzenelson identified with seemed to have been lost. Melancholy is like the voice of an alienated person who is deprived of heritage and hope for the future. This melancholy is necessary to shape the image of a new world in which it will no longer be possible for such a situation to happen again. Its starting point is the warning for the Nazis that they would be punished and would answer for their crimes.

Woe to you, who have entirely exterminated my peaceful people,
burned down my houses of worship,
all my shuls together with the Jews in them,
and my holy Jewish cities (Katzenelson, 1982, p. 67).

This is the moment when Katzenelson gives up a lament which results in irrational attempts at blaming God for everything that happened during World War II. He abandons Jeremiah’s lament and tries to outline some optimistic vision of the future. This conviction was related to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which could not be won, but as remorse it showed the whole world the hidden truth about a dying Jewish nation. One can wonder if in this way Katzenelson wanted to mobilise the global community to take some action. He himself could not do more than to write a literary appeal to all people. His own survival did not matter to him because it was the memory of the Holocaust which was to survive and this aim was achieved. The memory of the Holocaust became a world heritage, so what the Nazi tormentors hoped for, could not come true.

Conclusion

Generally, literature has the same task in society as ethics. It is to improve all people intellectually and morally. Therefore, it is not significant whether someone reads literary or scientific works because their influence begins on finding the first reader. The slogans “art for art’s sake” or “science about science” seem to be against the task writers or ethicists voluntarily devoted themselves to when they started their career. Therefore, the fact that the tragedy of the Holocaust can be ignored by science shows that the most enlightened representatives of society have not understood the importance of this event for human culture, and thus they cannot write anything meaningful about it. Instead they deal with safe metaethical issues related to how ethical concepts changed their meaning gradually when mass propaganda was being popularised by the German government. Undoubtedly, literature and all the art of the Third

Reich were harnessed to work for the sole purpose of depriving the right to be a human being of a significant part of humanity. It must be admitted that this task has been accomplished at a high level, – especially by Nazi literature and philosophy. Thus, it is incomprehensible that today the same branches of science and art cannot satisfactorily perform a task directed in the opposite direction.

The Holocaust remains a huge challenge for both science and art which has changed the history of humankind for ever. Such a tragic story about the extermination of a whole nation could be a trigger for great literary masterpieces and scientific treaties analysing its causes. However, ethics could not deal with the issue adequately, because even if it did undertake such issues, it hardly ever went beyond numerical data, as if the victims became dehumanised and turned into collective fractions of people murdered. Some ethical works on the moral dimension of the Holocaust seem to have been mainly inspired by literature.. It was because writers could somehow render the immense tragedy and endeavoured to register their impressions and pass them down to survivors. Fortunately for all of us living today they succeeded even if they themselves died. “Holocaust literature arises in response to an event that would render the capacity both for response and for literary expression impossible. And yet it is there. It is there because the soul is there, if only as a remnant. Holocaust literature transcends the particulars of the event defined by death to affirm a movement of return to life” (Patterson, Berger & Cargas, 2002, p. xiii). One can only wonder why so much time was needed for scientific treaties to be written about the Holocaust. At present there seem to be many of them but they all concentrate on similar aspects. With literary works it is different because “the Jew remembers and thus refuses to remain silent – despite himself” (Patterson, Berger & Cargas, 2002, p. xv).

In conclusion, it is also worth emphasising that the Holocaust may be beyond some people’s comprehension. It was a collective experience and probably no one is able to express its horror. Even the most sensitive artists managed to express it only through the language of metaphors and symbols. This raises the question of how recipients manage to read such an indirect message. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson are probably right in saying, “It seems that the ability to understand experiences through a metaphor is another sense, such as sight, touch or hearing, and the metaphor provides the only way to perceive and experience a “significant portion of the real world” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2010, p. 305). The flood of information reaching everyone every day, develops a specific sense to create a coherent and clear picture of events out of a large amount of news. A permanent presence in the society of the truth about the Holocaust expressed by artists, complemented with science, is essential in creating such a picture. It is no wonder then that Berel Lang noticed that writers writing about the Holocaust are aware of this fact and the titles of their novels express that e.g. “Speaking the Unspeakable” or “Voicing the Void”. But such depiction of the Holocaust also unexpectedly reveals the biblical (theological) roots of what happened, which Berel Lang highlighted in one of his works: “The Holocaust, viewed in these terms, seems to carry the biblical commandment against making graven images to a still more radical extreme: of it, we hear, no one can create images, even if they wish” (Lang, 2005, p. 73). Therefore, the Holocaust cannot be read only from today’s perspective, because then we get a temporary, ephemeral image, out of the context of what actually happened. It is the task of art to express the inexpressible in natural language.

It must also not be forgotten that “The awareness that there will be only a legend after the Holocaust is another element of the survivors’ moral suffering” (Engelking, 1994, p. 3012). They are afraid that the tragedy of the Holocaust may not contribute to the moral correction of humanity. In this sense, it could be considered an event that has not been accounted for, has not been accepted, though it may be repeated in the future. The Holocaust may be a one-off event that will not happen but it may also happen again in every subsequent supra-local war. We cannot accept the pessimistic thesis of Zygmunt Bauman that the Holocaust, “has most certainly changed little, if anything, in the course of the subsequent history of our collective

consciousness and self-understanding” (Bauman, 1989, p. 5). It is from this that the eternal task of art is to maintain the sensitive memory of events from years ago, in order to fulfill the poet’s will at any time:

Arise from every grain of sand and stone
Scream, let dust, flame and smoke shout with you –
It is your blood and juices, it is the core of your bones,
Body and life! Louder! Let us hear it (Katzenelson, 1980)

Has this work been completed? This is doubtful, because the preserved materials are not facts. They are a testimony of their times and the state of mind of the people who wrote them. Therefore, modern scholars analysing the extraordinary evidence of the dark era of World War II could already say: “We may now die in peace. We fulfilled our mission. May history attest for us” (Kassow 2007, p. 3).

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