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Auschwitz-Birkenau: Place, Symbol, Narrative Construct

In both popular and scholarly discourses, "Auschwitz" as a word refers to more than Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Nazi German Concentration camp on Polish soil. It is also used as a synonym for all Nazi concentration and death camps, and even for the Holocaust (or at least some aspects of it). Theodor Adorno, for instance, used the term Auschwitz to refer to the entire system that enabled the Holocaust to happen; what more, many critics understand his famous proclamation "no poetry after Auschwitz" as a prohibition of "imaginative representation of the Holocaust," to use Elana Gomel's words.[1] So too, Giorgio Agamben's influential study, *The Remnants of Auschwitz*,[2] examines not only Auschwitz, but Nazi German concentration camps in general, as a phenomenon rather than as a specific place located in Upper Silesia. Agamben's use

[1] E. Gomel, "*No Fantasy after Auschwitz?*, review of *The Fantastic in Holocaust Literature and Film: Critical Perspectives* by J .B. Kerman and J. E. Browning," *Science Fiction Studies* 42, no. 2, Special Issue on Italian Science Fiction (2015).

[2] G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

of the term "Auschwitz" allowed him to touch upon aspects in his work that transgress the boundaries of Holocaust studies, which is understood as the study of issues related to the mass killing of European Jews by Nazi Germany.

Auschwitz-Birkenau is, nevertheless, the name of a specific camp, functioning after 1947 as a museum, a memorial, and a research and educational center, visited yearly by close to a million and a half people from all around the world. As a material place, Auschwitz is, in fact, not one camp but a complex consisting of Auschwitz I (also known as the main camp), Auschwitz II or Birkenau, Auschwitz III (Monowitz) and several smaller sub-camps located in the vicinity of Oświęcim. To paraphrase Franciszek Piper: Auschwitz I, the main camp, was a multifunctional concentration camp connected primarily with the first, so-called "Polish" period of the camp's existence. Birkenau, known also as Auschwitz II, was a death camp in operation primarily during the second, "Jewish period" (1942–45), as over 90% of its victims were Jews. Birkenau was also a place of the so-called Zigeunerlager and of Porajmos (or Samudaripen) – the genocide of Roma and Sinti. Monowitz (or Auschwitz III), where Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi were imprisoned, was a labor camp, closely connected with the Third Reich industry. We might note here that in their (famous and influential) memoirs, both Weisel and Levi used the term Auschwitz, rather than Monowitz, in reference to their experiences, and in so doing complicated (even simplified) the picture of the Auschwitz complex transmitted to younger generations. Despite their administrative and spatial separation, all three camps in contemporary discourses have become fused and, in a sense, truncated, into one symbolic place known generally as "Auschwitz," or Auschwitz-Birkenau (called Oświęcim in Poland).

In addition to the Nazi camps' multifunctional and multicultural settings that contributed to the palimpsestic character of their contemporary representations, the understanding of the camps varies significantly due to different national memories, current

political agendas, and cultural discourses that frequently conflict. Though very important, this issue is touched upon in this article only marginally. From the point of view of this text, most crucial is Giorgio Agamben's observation that while "the problem of the historical, material, technical, bureaucratic and legal circumstances in which the extermination of the Jews took place has been sufficiently clarified (...) [t]he same cannot be said for the ethical and political significance of the extermination or even for a human understanding of what happened there – that is for its contemporary relevance."[3]

As a specific camp, Auschwitz can (and almost always is) studied with different approaches and concepts derived from various disciplines. For reasons quite obvious, the same cannot be achieved on the level of "a human understanding" of the camp. Researchers and academics tend to study Auschwitz through a variety of aspects and issues, or through specific disciplinary lenses, aiming only at a limited understanding of "the bigger picture." A prominent Holocaust scholar, Peter Hayes, warns that "making dreadful developments intelligible runs the risk of seeming to lend them a kind of intelligence or even justification." He underscores his point by quoting a French proverb, "To understand all is to forgive all."[4] Indeed, those studying and teaching about the Holocaust have to refrain from creating false ideas of understanding. Instead, teaching should aim to impart an educated non-understanding of the Holocaust on the basis of academic studies, acknowledgment of scarce and incomplete historical facts, coupled with various interdisciplinary notions and approaches. In this way, academic studies would not aim at an understanding (nor, as such, at a mental acceptance) of the system, but at an understanding of its various aspects, keeping in mind that these studies do not lead to generalizations

[3] Ibid., 11.

[4] P. Hayes, "Introduction," in *How was it possible? A Holocaust Reader*, ed. P. Hayes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), xiii.

or paint any kind of picture of the camp as a whole. As a subject of academic studies and research, Auschwitz does continue to function very much as a fragmented place, somehow differently and separately from the former Auschwitz system of the camps, turned after the war into the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and memorial, which operates with clear commemorative and educational missions.

Because of this clear difference between symbolic imagining, academic fragmentation and material presence, Auschwitz as a case study provides intriguing insights into the modalities by which the symbolic and the material are able to coexist and influence one another. Reuben S. Rose-Redwood states that "Places of memory are sites where the symbolic imaginings of the past interweave with the materialities of the present."[5] Referring to Jeffrey Davis[6], Lakshman Yapa[7], and Derek H. Alderman[8], Rose-Redwood also adds that "Like any geographical space, they are constituted as 'discursive-material formations' that acquire symbolic power by becoming integrated into 'the geographic fabric of everyday life.'"[9] He argues, on the one hand, that "In many cases, discursive and material production of place is part of a socio-spatial project 'to institute' horizons, to establish boundaries, to secure the identity of places," yet, on the other hand, he also points to Doreen Massey's argument that "... such attempts at the stabilization of meaning

[5] R. S. Rose-Redwood, "From Number to Name: Symbolic Capital, Places of Memory and the Politics of Street Renaming in New York City," *Social & Cultural Geography* 9, no. 4 (2008): 433.

[6] J. S. Davis, "Representing Place: "Deserted Isles" and the Reproduction of Bikini Atoll," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (2005).

[7] L. Yapa, "Improved Seeds and Constructed Scarcity," in *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, development, social movements*, ed. R. Peet and M. Watts (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 69–70.

[8] D. H. Alderman, "Street Names as Memorial Arenas: The Reputational Politics of Commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. in a Georgia County," *Historical Geography. An Annual Journal of Research, Commentary and Reviews* 29 (2002).

[9] R. S. Rose-Redwood, "From Number to Name."

are constantly the site of social contest."[10] Coalescing these two vantage points, Rose-Redwood concludes that "Places should be viewed (...) less as clearly delineated 'objects' with distinct spatial identities and more as always-unfinished products of social relations. Similarly, each place of memory is constructed in relation to other places, and it is this relationality of place that requires critical analysis."[11]

In this context, the observation that historical places are connected primarily not with the past but with its politicized contemporary representations seems to be obvious. However, a closer look at Auschwitz as a symbolic place, as a museum, and as a memorial additionally brings to the surface several latent issues not necessarily derived from those political or social processes involved in the creation and contestation of this place of memory. The crux of these meanings lies in a nexus that is less a matter of politicized versions of national pasts (be they created for current needs or political gains), but more a matter of the constant tension and negotiation between the symbolic representation and the physical reality that, in their oscillation, bring to light an under-studied aspect of Auschwitz as a place of memory. The complexity of this relationship may be easily illustrated in the following example: the need to honor the dead, as well as demonstrate solidarity with the victims, is continually displayed by heads of states, representatives of various groups and institutions (educational, religious, etc.) and many others; yet this need arises precisely from the *symbolic* significance of Auschwitz. This task of memorialization becomes complicated in view of the enormous size of the camp complex. While the camp (or even the complex of the camps) as an entirety can hold a symbolic meaning, in practice only some of the camp's places are visited by tourists. This means, ironically, that even in

[10] D. B. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 5.

[11] R. S. Rose-Redwood, "From Number to Name," 434.

its physicality, the camp functions as an iconic representation of the space where the camps and sub-camps were once located. This circumstance raises the question of which places in the camp(s) function as places of memory (and places of honoring the dead) and why these specific places are somehow chosen as such; inversely, such a discussion also warrants inquiry into the matters that have levelled some places, discursively and in practice, to the position of non-places of memory. These matters must necessarily touch on the circumstances of and the fundamental reason for the absence of certain narrations. Such absences might have developed from the start as regards some places or they might have begun later as particular narrations ceased to exist. And this is clearly an issue with its own set of relevant points.

In the Auschwitz camps discussed here, specially designated and socially negotiated places function as representations of suffering and as places to honor victims. While in Auschwitz I this role was quite naturally taken over by the Wall of Death, the killing place located between Block 10 and Block 11, in Birkenau a special monument was erected close to the remnants of the crematoria. The absence of clearly visible remnants of the Monowitz labor camp, however, yields a noted lack of visits by VIP delegations, as well as regular visitors. And those who do visit Monowitz often leave without a clear sense of it as a place of memory, a problem that translates Monowitz's status into one as a "blank" space. In the absence of an "official" place of commemoration, the local population has transferred their memory (or, more precisely, their consciousness of the place's past) into a spontaneously erected monument that serves locals (as well as rare groups of visitors) as a place of memory and to honor those killed in Monowitz. Of all the decisive factors considered when choosing and designating/reconstructing such places of memory and memorialization in each of the camps, the topography of the camps, available historical information, and narrations about the past are undoubtedly the most important.

Group tours of the Auschwitz camps follow a route designed for visitors by those survivors who returned to the camp after the war in order to convert it into a museum. This is the case in both the main camp and in Birkenau. Many groups and individual tourists come to Upper Silesia especially to visit Auschwitz, but there are also "accidental" visitors. Tours of the camp are advertised widely in Kraków as one of the main "attractions" of the region, and the camps are also listed among "must see" places for tourists visiting the city, famous for its rich history apart from the Holocaust, and also as a destination for British stag parties that have become notorious. It is quite safe, however, to assume that even "accidental" visitors know something of Auschwitz before finding themselves there. Those who construct visual representations of the camp frequently mix images of Auschwitz I and Birkenau, while Auschwitz III (Monowitz) lacks a comparable visual image; there are no pictures of this camp. To add to the confusion, popular culture has visually and conceptually merged the two locations into one, where the visual/aesthetic image of the camps has little to do with its spatial reality. The camps are clustered as a patchwork of images of the actual locations, but these images do not necessarily correlate in popular understanding with the actual spaces of Auschwitz and Birkenau. While on location, tourists have to confront those images with two separate sites of memory, which differ greatly in many respects, including their architecture, size and location. Visitors experience Auschwitz I and Birkenau differently. Auschwitz I is crowded with groups in headphones following their guides as they look around. In Birkenau, groups do not have headphones and instead stop in several places to listen to their guides. Visitors of Birkenau can, for example, enter the guard tower above the main entrance to see the view once available to the guards. Auschwitz I, by contrast, is (with exceptions granted to some study tours) presented only through the perspectives that were available to prisoners. Different building materials in both camps mean that they are each preserved differently and, in turn, mean that their

contemporary uses are also different. Auschwitz I houses archives, a research center, educational programs, a publishing department and a large number of offices. All of them, with the exception of the ones located in the former Komendanture, are in blocks with a deep history of intense human suffering. The wooden barracks of Birkenau did not survive; only brick stoves, chimneys, and water reservoirs mark the barracks' former presence on a vast field. The gas chamber in Auschwitz I still stands only because it ceased to be used, unlike the Birkenau crematoria, whose remains/ruins are the only physical marker of their existence. Wildlife is now taking over Birkenau, while this has not occurred in Auschwitz, in part due to the way it was built, its smaller size, and the constant presence of people. While Auschwitz is always full of people, Birkenau is relatively quiet (even when tourists are there).

Since the current model of Holocaust education is based on written memoirs and meetings with survivors to hear their stories, most visitors of the Museum are familiar with at least one personal narration connected with Auschwitz. The selection of stories with which people are familiar varies, depending largely on the national approach and the local curriculum for Holocaust education in their home countries. Thanks to the media, visitors are also familiar with some images of the camp. Thus, even before entering the camp, they have their own vision of the space, and it is this mentally constructed landscape (informed by media images of the actual landscape) where they visualize the stories they are familiar with. Perhaps unwittingly, the reality of the camps is, in this practice, confronted with such semi-imagined versions of Auschwitz, though the people themselves might only become cognizant of this when they enter the material place for the first time and their mental mapping of Auschwitz is juxtaposed against its actual layout. In short, before someone enters the camp for the first time, the real is confronted symbolically with their imaginary visions; after such a person enters, the confrontation turns on their psychical feeling of understanding, yet their visit also initiates a new series of con-

frontations between the rhetorical/imagined and the actual as the space of the real camp holds a number of symbolic representations in such tangible spaces as monuments and exhibits, neither of which are part of the actual historic site, but are extensions of the polemical mental space cast upon a physical construction.

Narrations with which the visitors are familiar before entering the camp are already "located" on an imaginary map, mentally created from images distributed by media. Since the only surviving pictures from the ramp in Auschwitz-Birkenau are the ones taken during the arrival of the Hungarian Jews, this means it is the ramp inside Birkenau that serves popular visualizations as a default background image of "a ramp"; effectively, readers of any Holocaust story about transports, regardless of which camp(s) a given story might be set in, imagine the moment to have taken place at the ramp in Birkenau. This visualization might be correct for some narratives, but clearly not for all. For example, in Tadeusz Borowski's short story "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen...," we find one of the most well-known stories of the "unloading of a transport," in which the author tells the story of a mother who is reprimanded by a Jewish prisoner for denying her own child. Many readers, who are familiar with both Borowski's story and Birkenau, might imagine that this story took place on the ramp in Auschwitz II. However, the story took place on a different platform, the Alte Judenrampe,[12] where earlier transports arrived.[13] The Alte Judenrampe is located a couple kilometers away from Auschwitz and approximately a kilometer from Birkenau. For precisely this reason, it is outside of the tourist routes and therefore outside the scope of where the actual may confront the imagined.

[12] See *Auschwitz from A to Z. An Illustrated History* (Oświęcim, Poland: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2013).

[13] See I. Bartosik, L. Martyniak, and P. Setkiewicz, *The Beginnings of the Extermination of Jews in KL Auschwitz in the Light of the Source Materials* (Oświęcim, Poland: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2014).

Moreover, the actual ramp from Borowski's story was discovered only quite recently and was just restored in 2004. By this time new houses had already been built in close proximity to the ramp, making the current view of the area difficult to photograph. Dealing with personal emotions can, and usually does, lead visitors to form judgmental views of the contemporary inhabitants of the neighboring houses; thus, it would be very difficult (and maybe even counterproductive?) for local institutions and organizations to encourage visits to this ramp. A judgmental attitude towards Oświęcim inhabitants (often expressed in the question "How can you live here?") is also somehow visible in the rather hesitant attitude of business people, who are frequently unwilling to invest in enterprises in the city and its region.

On both platforms, the one inside Birkenau and on the Alte Judenrampe, there are train cars from the time of the Holocaust. In a symbolic gesture, the Museum does not open the cars to the public, leaving the "inside" space as victims' territory that is "open" to visitors through survivors' narrations. These narrations have conveyed such powerful imagery that the wagons on the train tracks in Birkenau are treated by visitors as places of memory and commemoration. Jewish visitors, for example, place rocks on them in a manner similar to the Jewish tradition of placing rocks on gravestones in order to commemorate the dead.

Not all narrations play the same role in creating or modelling the way in which a given space is visualized and experienced. A prime example of this is the very entrance to the Auschwitz I camp with its famous sign above the gate, "Arbeit macht frei." Many tourists (individuals and groups alike) pose in front of the gate to have their picture taken with the famous "landmark." Unbeknownst to them, in the background of their pictures is the camp's "puff," or brothel, for the Auschwitz prisoners. When people learn of this, the existence of the puff often makes postwar generations, in particular, uncomfortable. Furthermore, very little is written about the brothel in memoirs and reports. Regardless of their age, nation-

ality, or political beliefs, visitors find it difficult to reckon with the existence of the puff in Auschwitz. Auschwitz is a place where prisoners were killed and tormented; physical (sexual) pleasure does not, in their imagined Auschwitz, belong to the narrative, and thus it surely cannot belong in the actual Auschwitz either. Knowledge of the puff violates the martyrological character that popular culture and media has guided people to map onto the place. What is more, not only is the puff very close to the gate, but it is also not far from the Wall of Death. In patriarchal discourses, any references to its existence sounds sensational and, thus, highly improper in this context. The puff was described at length by Borowski in "Auschwitz Our Home," but the culture of shame does not allow for contemporary visitors to look at Block 24 through the eyes of the narrator, Tadeusz, despite the fact that it is in the background of almost every tourist photo taken to prove that they were there. Borowski's literary narration that has immortalized the puff has lost to the patriarchal narration of cultural shame related to sexuality and to the rhetoric of "innocent victims." To set this point against the actual camp narration of this place, allow me to quote Borowski:

> But the most important place of all is one flight up. The Puff. Its windows are left slightly open at all times, even in winter. And from the windows – after roll call – peek out pretty little heads of various shades of colour, with delicate shoulders, as white and fresh as snow, emerging from their frill blue, pink and sea-green robes (the green is my favorite colour). [...] The Puff is forever surrounded by a crowd of the most important citizens of the camp. For every Juliet there are at least a thousand Romeos. Hence the crowd, and the competition. The Romeos stand along the windows of the barracks across the street; they shout, wave, invite. The Camp Elder and the Camp Kapo are there, and so are the doctors from the hospital and the Kapos from the Kommandos.[14]

[14] T. Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen...* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 106.

The process that leads to dominant and dormant narratives is well explained by Karen Till, who argues that "political struggles over cultural recognition and the spatialization of social memory are principally about determining 'whose conception of the past should prevail in the public realm.'"[15] She also believes that "social memory and place-making activities tell us more about the people building a memorial than the peoples and pasts being commemorated."[16] However, according to Steven Legg, the act of remembering is inseparable from the act of "active forgetting."[17] Owen Dwyer additionally argues that the social exclusions that pervade many historical narratives are often replicated and reinforced as "materialized discourses" in commemorative landscapes.[18] In a similar way, Roma Sendyka writes about no-places of memory, sites with a rich history that somehow seem not to be commemorated and for which she coined the term "after all, places."[19] Erased from the everyday discourses of commemoration, these "after all, places" subsist only through the so-called "informed visits," visits by people who know what happened there; thus, their existence is marked primarily through negation. Thus we might describe in this way those places non-created by witnesses' and survivors' narrations, absent in routes taken by guided tours, not visited by participants of the March of the Living, and other similar initiatives. Fields of the ashes of victims of Nazi Germany spread for kilometers behind the Birkenau camp. Only the very few "initiated" visitors

[15] K. Till, "Places of Memory," in *A Companion to Political Geography*, ed. J. A. Agnew, K. Mitchell, and G. Toal (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 290.

[16] *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 18.

[17] S. Legg, "Reviewing Geographies of Memory/Forgetting," *Environment and Planning. A* 39, no. 2 (2007).

[18] O. J. Dwyer, "Interpreting the Civil Rights Movement: Place, Memory, and Conflict," *The Professional Geographer* 52, no. 4 (2000).

[19] R. Sendyka, "Pryzma: zrozumieć nie-miejsce pamięci," in *Inne przestrzenie, inne miejsca: Mapy i terytoria*, ed. D. Czaja (Wołowiec Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2013).

know to go there to pay tribute to those people, people whose stories were not turned into narration. These places are marked by the Museum, but, curiously, also by a notable limited growth of vegetation; there are too many ashes there for trees to grow. In every available narration and regardless of the understanding of the word, "Auschwitz" belongs to the living, as only they can create a narration that, in turn, creates places of memory. Visits to the Museum are therefore limited to the scope of a gesture towards those who were able to tell their stories, to those that survived through a miraculous series of events.

Auschwitz-Birkenau – miejsce, symbol, narracyjny konstrukt

Streszczenie

Tematem artykułu jest refleksja nad współzależnością konkretnej przestrzeni obozu oraz jej reprezentacji symbolicznych, artystycznych i tekstowych, takich jak wspomnieniowe narracje ocalałych więźniów. Były obóz zagłady Auschwitz funkcjonuje współcześnie jak miejsce pamięci i muzeum, ale jednocześnie także jako symboliczna reprezentacja nie tylko wszystkich niemieckich nazistowskich obozów, ale także całej Zagłady. Jednocześnie zaś Auschwitz to określona przestrzeń, której zwiedzający turyści doświadczają fizycznie, i która stanowi miejsce symbolicznych hołdów pamięci składanych przez głowy państw i przedstawicieli różnych organizacji.

Słowa kluczowe: narracja, przestrzeń, pamięć, Zagłada, Auschwitz-Birkenau