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## Spatial Configurations of the Concentration Camp: The Inside and the Outside

People coming to the former concentration camp Auschwitz today enter a site that is a memorial, a graveyard, a museum, an archive, a research institution, a workplace and many other things. They enter the site and engage with its contemporary functions. Endowed with a myriad of different personal, as well as national and generational backgrounds, visitors of every description might try to commemorate the sites' past, but what they can by no means do, is gain access to the concentration and death camp it was over 70 years ago. This dimension belongs to the past. And facing the current site, it proves difficult to even imagine it. As Ruth Klüger illustrates for the similar case of Dachau: "I once visited Dachau with some Americans who had asked me to come along. It was a clean and proper place and it would have taken more imagination than your average John or Jane Doe possesses to visualize the camp as it was forty years earlier."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. Klüger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2001), 67. Klüger originally published her memoir in German in 1992 as *weiter leben: Eine Jugend*. Since the English book is not simply a translation but rather

The site has changed in its factual appearance. Where there was once mud and dust, soil trampled by the feet of hundreds and thousands of prisoners, there are now rich meadows, barely touched by anyone; wildlife and a great number of birds populate the remains of Birkenau; the visitor encounters only “architectural fragments,” as Alexandra Klei calls them;<sup>2</sup> most of the wooden barracks have vanished, only their smokestacks and wall footings remain; of the main crematories only ruins are preserved; the white and the red cottages have disappeared; Auschwitz I accommodates offices, seminar rooms, archival storage, book stores, and even a small kiosk. But these are not the only changes. Following the theoretical approaches of authors such as Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault, we can understand space not as primarily defined by its architecture, but by its practice.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the physical site alone would not allow us to understand the space of the concentration camp in any case.<sup>4</sup> Our experience is not only free of the dimensions of pain, terror, hunger, fear and imminent death, it is also different in its simple appropriation of space. With the camp’s nature, also its spatial practices have changed. When visitors move through it today, their steps are governed by completely different laws than were those of prisoners, prisoner-functionaries

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a re-writing of her initial text, there are occasional differences between the two versions. As a result, I sometimes rely on a part of the German original that does not appear in English. In these cases, the translation is my own and I provide the German citation. Otherwise, quotes and page references are from the English version.

<sup>2</sup> A. Klei, *Der erinnerte Ort. Geschichte durch Architektur. Zur baulichen und gestalterischen Repräsentation der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2011), 31.

<sup>3</sup> See M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984). See also M. Foucault, “Space, Power and Knowledge,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. S. During (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> For this very reason, Klüger introduces the term *timescapes* to indicate the “missing ingredients [...] the odor of fear emanating from human bodies, the concentrated aggression, the reduced minds” that will not be encountered at a later point in time. R. Klüger, *Still Alive*, 67.

and even the guards. They move freely, they can leave any time. Most buildings are open and visitors can access spaces that belonged to the prisoners, just as they can access that of the perpetrators. They can easily change perspective, oversee the full scope of the camp, enter the commandant's garden, and then visit the suffocation cells.

Accordingly, I would like to suggest that to a certain degree contemporary understanding of the Auschwitz of the past also depends on our understanding of its specific spatial practices. And these practices are only accessible through narrations. At least for most people nowadays, they are the only links between today's site and its past. Therefore the camp's spatial structure is superimposed with the accounts of its victims, its documents, the few existing photographs, artwork, and the remnants of its history. Layers and layers of these texts are placed upon the actual site in order to grasp what defined it in the past. The concentration camp that has ceased to exist, as well as its former spatial practices, are only accessible through an accumulation of stratified stories and accounts. Auschwitz is, first and foremost, a narrated space.

The following analysis will attempt to foreground these textual layers to create a clearer understanding of the spatial practices and dynamics that separate the contemporary experience from that of the past. The main aim is not the analysis of an objective or neutral spatial structure, but the reconstruction of the subjective, the "lived" space, as constituted by and expressed in the narrated experience of the prisoners. By isolating spatial aspects and deepening our understanding of their experience, I hope to achieve a heightened awareness of the complexity of the camp reality and its spatial dimensions.

One aspect that distinguishes the contemporary and the past experience very drastically is the forcible separation from the outside world. Visitors who enter the site today do not renounce their spatial autonomy, at least the very basic decision to leave is always available to them. Maintaining an unsevered connection to

the outside world and the freedom to return to it deeply affects the experience of the site. The following reflections will focus on this very specific aspect and will assemble observations in the form of survivors' accounts and literary representations to render a well-nuanced picture of its manifestations and effects.

Although the focus will lie on the "lived" and narrated experience, the factual conditions provide an indispensable framework. In his foundational work about the system of the concentration camp, Eugen Kogon points out that the camp was meant to be isolated and cut off from the surrounding environment.<sup>5</sup> Electrified fences, barbed wire, watchtowers, floodlights, as well as the inner and the outer line of posts were the first and most evident layer that separated the prisoners from the outer world. The dividing line was thoroughly guarded, every transgression severely punished. Wolfgang Sofsky points to a second, less tangible layer of barriers. It originated from the specific rules that were imposed to reinforce the physical boundaries. Transmitting messages of any kind, assisting in escapes, and manipulating the fence were met with the penalty of death. Entering the so called *Neutrale Zone*, a narrow stretch of land in front of the electrified fence, was immediately responded to with gunfire.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the camp was closed off from most communication. The few letters that some prisoners were allowed to write were strictly censored, personal contact with civilians was forbidden.<sup>7</sup> An area of about 40 square kilometers, the so-called *Interessengebiet* (zone of interest) of the camp,

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<sup>5</sup> E. Kogon, *Der SS-Staat. Das System der deutschen Konzentrationslager*. (München: Wilhelm Heyne Verlag, 2012), 74.

<sup>6</sup> See W. Sofsky, *Die Ordnung des Terrors. Das Konzentrationslager* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 1993), 70. See also P. Setkiewicz, "Die Einzäunung und das System der Absperrung des Lagers vor Ausbruchsversuchen im Konzentrationslager Auschwitz," in *Architektur des Verbrechens. Das System der Sicherung und Isolierung im Lager Auschwitz*, ed. T. Swiebocka (Oświęcim, Poland: Staatliches Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2008), 13.

<sup>7</sup> W. Sofsky, *Die Ordnung des Terrors*, 74.

was depopulated, or at least de-polonized, and there were almost no people in the vicinity with whom prisoners could safely be in contact.<sup>8</sup> The isolation was meant to be as absolute as possible. In his infamous welcome speech, Lagerführer Fritzsch mocked the prisoners by informing them that the only way to exit the camp was through the chimneys of the crematoria.<sup>9</sup> And indeed, releases were extremely rare and “immeasurably more people [left] by way of the crematories than through the gate.”<sup>10</sup>

According to Hannah Arendt, this seclusion of the camp was the main precondition for what she calls the “experiment of totalitarian rule.”<sup>11</sup> This experiment was set out, as Arendt puts it, to prove the ultimate totalitarian claim that humans can be governed in their entirety, to the very last of their impulses.<sup>12</sup> Only by cutting them off from the world of the others, the “world of the living” as she puts it, were the Nazis able to establish their all-encompassing power over their victims.<sup>13</sup> There was simply no room left to evade its clutches. Sofsky stresses a similar point when he states that absolute power can only establish itself in an entirely closed-off environment.<sup>14</sup> Crucial for this is, among other things, the lack of external influence. Blocking off the camps and the prisoners from the sight of others also withdrew them from the last corrective potential of an outside world.<sup>15</sup> In reverse, con-

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<sup>8</sup> Auschwitz Birkenau State Museum, “Dictionary of Terms from the History of Auschwitz,” <http://70.auschwitz.org/index.php?lang=en>.

<sup>9</sup> T. Paczula, “Die ersten Opfer sind die Polen,” in *Auschwitz: Zeugnisse und Berichte*, ed. H. G. Adler, H. Langbein, and E. Lingens-Reiner (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1995), 14.

<sup>10</sup> S. Szmaglewska, *Smoke over Birkenau* (Oświęcim, Poland: The Auschwitz Birkenau Museum, 2008), 130.

<sup>11</sup> H. Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge Totaler Herrschaft: Antisemitismus, Imperialismus, Totale Herrschaft* (München: Piper, 2011), 908.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 907.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 908, 935.

<sup>14</sup> W. Sofsky, *Die Ordnung des Terrors*, 70.

<sup>15</sup> H. Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge Totaler Herrschaft*, 917.

tact with civilians was experienced by prisoners as a precious lifeline.<sup>16</sup>

As regards this strict regulation of external contact, the concentration camp resembles Erving Goffman's concept of a total institution. Following his observations, all institutions of this type can be described as "a world in themselves." Where they differ greatly, however, is the level of their closure. An all-encompassing, total institution is characterized by its regulation of the contact with the outer world. Restrictions of movement, as physically embodied by closed gates, walls, a fence or a particularly impassable terrain are the markers that define its absoluteness.<sup>17</sup> Goffman's study mainly focuses on asylums, but also refers to other institutions such as prisoners of war camps, concentration camps, prisons, retirement homes, orphanages, military facilities and even boarding schools. Clearly, the concentration camp marks the most violent manifestation of this type of institution. Still, they all show a similar tendency to fully regulate their inmates' sociality, their activities and movements, their daily life and all their needs.<sup>18</sup> Stefanie Endlich describes the camp correspondingly as a space that is "hermetically sealed" externally and strictly regulated internally.<sup>19</sup>

Authors such as Alan Kramer or Sofsky clearly distinguish the guiding principles of the concentration camp from those that govern a prison. Apart from the fact that prisons usually follow the logic of individual isolation (or the isolation of smaller groups),

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<sup>16</sup> W. Kielar, *Anus Mundi. Fünf Jahre Auschwitz* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1989), 152.

<sup>17</sup> E. Goffman, "Über die Merkmale Totaler Institutionen," in *Asyle: Über die soziale Situation psychiatrischer Patienten und anderer Insassen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), 15–16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> S. Endlich, "Die äußere Gestalt des Terrors. Zu Städtebau und Architektur der Konzentrationslager," in *Der Ort des Terrors: Geschichte der Nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, ed. W. Benz (München: C.H. Beck, 2005), 210.

whereas the camp organizes large, dense groups of people,<sup>20</sup> one of the main differences is that prisons generally still have certain ties to the legal system. Crucially, the concentration camp does not (or only does so in particular cases and then very rudimentarily). Kramer specifies this difference, arguing that prisoners were usually kept in prisons as a consequence of a conviction and only for a defined period of time. Most camp inmates, however, were not detained for “what they had done, but for what they [were].”<sup>21</sup>

Giorgio Agamben points to a similar fact when he writes that “[t]he camps [...] were not born out of ordinary law, and even less were they the product – as one might have believed – of a transformation and development of prison law; rather, they were born out of the state of exception and martial law.”<sup>22</sup> Agamben argues that this is even more obvious in regard to the Nazi concentration camps, where

the juridical foundation of internment was not ordinary law but rather the *Schutzhaft* (literally, protective custody), which was a juridical institution of Prussian derivation that Nazi jurists sometimes considered a measure of preventive policing inasmuch as it enabled the “taking into custody” of individuals regardless of any relevant criminal behavior.<sup>23</sup>

Camps were based on the state of exception, not tied to the legal system, but rather originating in its suspension. Their borders circumscribed a space without any impartial law, a fact that can be illustrated extremely well with an episode described in Filip

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<sup>20</sup> See W. Sofsky, *Die Ordnung des Terrors*, 66. See also A. Kramer, “Einleitung,” in *Welt der Lager: Zur “Erfolgsgeschichte” einer Institution*, ed. B. Greiner and A. Kramer (Hamburg: Hamburger Ed., 2013), 11.

<sup>21</sup> A. Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), xxxiv. Quoted in Kramer, “Einleitung,” 11.

<sup>22</sup> G. Agamben, “What Is a Camp?,” in *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000), 38.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Müller's book *Eyewitness Auschwitz. Three Years in the Gas Chambers*. Müller depicts the cruel ritual of "sports" during which the violent Blockschreiber Vacek beats several prisoners to death. Being exposed to this deadly drill for some time, a fellow inmate, Dr. Albert Paskus, finally objects. After conversing with himself in a low voice about the sheer impossibility of such events, Dr. Paskus, who is a renowned lawyer and scholar, eventually approaches a Rotenführer called Schlage to inform him about the wrongdoing. His intention is to file a formal complaint. As a spokesmen of the law, as much as a human being, Dr. Paskus appeals to the authority in a firm belief that the injustice he witnessed has to be a deviance and will therefore be rectified, that is to say punished. Yet this is not the case. Müller describes how after a few moments of bewildered silence, Dr. Paskus is beaten to death upon the Rotenführer's command.<sup>24</sup>

The system Dr. Paskus appealed to held no validity inside the camp's limits. What the doctor did not realize was that by entering the camp, the prisoners lost all their ties to any legal system whatsoever. Analyzing exactly this particular condition, Agamben states the following: "One ought to reflect on the paradoxical status of the camp as a space of exception: the camp is a piece of territory that is placed outside the normal juridical order."<sup>25</sup> The area of the camp is cut out of the validity of the legal system and placed under the rule of a different type of order. Law and facts coincide,<sup>26</sup> so there is no impartial legal system left for the prisoners to refer to. Inmates lose all former assurances of security<sup>27</sup> and access to all

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<sup>24</sup> F. Müller, "Sonderbehandlung. Drei Jahre in den Krematorien und Gaskammern von Auschwitz," (München: Verlag Steinhausen GmbH, 1979), 9–15.

<sup>25</sup> G. Agamben, "What Is a Camp?," 40.

<sup>26</sup> G. Agamben, "Das Lager als *nómos* der Moderne," in *Homo Sacer. Die Souveränität der Macht und das nackte Leben* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002), 179.

<sup>27</sup> J. Baberowski, "Einleitung" in *Gewalträume Soziale Ordnungen im Ausnahmezustand*, ed. Jörg Baberowski and Gabriele Metzler (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2012), 25.

entities they could possibly address with a plea. The annulment of the legal system is tied back to the spatial isolation of an area that is henceforth considered a “space of exception,”<sup>28</sup> turning what was originally thought of as a “temporal suspension of the state of law” (i.e., state of exception) into a “permanent spatial arrangement.”<sup>29</sup> Even though a lack of rights had also been established for certain groups outside the camp, only inside its boundaries did it turn absolute with almost no chances of evading it. The permanent suspension is therefore closely tied to the impenetrability of the camp’s outer limits.

In terms of the prisoners’ experience, the mechanisms of closure led to a deep feeling of isolation that is repeatedly expressed in the accounts of survivors. Seweryna Szmaglewska describes the prisoners’ forlornness by using the topographical imagery of an island:

Through the twilight, the barracks with the women ranged before them, five abreast, gradually come to view. Mist from the neighboring bogs shrouds everything. It wraps itself around the entire camp, causing an illusion of a lonely island in the middle of an ocean of fog. Thousands of people are visible before the barracks, but beyond the wires there is no one over an area of many miles. [...] A sense of emptiness and isolation creeps slowly over us as the morning mist draws near the wires and begins its struggle with the light.<sup>30</sup>

As a writer, Szmaglewska employs artistic devices to create a literary representation of the prisoners’ experience. What starts out as the metaphorical depiction of a particular morning is gradually generalized and transformed into a portrayal of the general setting of the camp. The illusion created by the mist corresponds to the reality of an isolated and cut off space of confinement. The concen-

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<sup>28</sup> G. Agamben, “What Is a Camp?,” 40.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>30</sup> S. Szmaglewska, *Smoke over Birkenau*, 19.

tration of its population is contrasted to the vacated surroundings, thus echoing the image of the island.

This metaphoric description clearly indicates that the mechanisms of seclusion and containment had a very strong effect on the prisoners. The writings of another survivor will help to further elucidate this spatial experience. Although Jorge Semprún was interned in Buchenwald from January 1944 till April 1945 and was never a prisoner of Auschwitz, his description of concentration camp life and of the long journey to the camp touches on so many general aspects that it seems worth mentioning here. A central dichotomy that Semprún addresses is that of the inside and the outside. This may seem like a rather obvious distinction at first. But Semprún hastens to clarify that what he is talking about is not primarily about the freedom to go somewhere or do something. The distinction marks something more basic. While watching the inhabitants of a small town through the boards of a cattle car, Semprún comes to the realization that he is inside while these people, walking down the street, are outside. He then describes what he calls a deep and physical sense of sadness and adds: "It's not only the fact that they are free, which is also open to question. It's merely that they are outside, that for them there are roads, hedges beside the paths, fruit on the fruit trees, grapes on the vines. They, quite simply, are outside, and I am inside."<sup>31</sup>

Basically, being inside seems to be defined by a lack of access. By listing all the things that are within the villagers' reach, Semprún simultaneously draws a negative image of his own situation. But his description is not limited to this simple contrast. The detachment seems more severe. Streets, plants, and fruits are not only inaccessible to the prisoner; it is as if they actually do not exist for him. When he describes a similar situation again a few pages later (now from inside the camp), this becomes even more apparent. When the groups of Sunday-promenaders return to their

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<sup>31</sup> J. Semprún, *The Cattle Truck* (London: Serif, 1993), 21–22.

homes, the outside world is gone too: "I was left alone. There was only the inside, and I was in it."<sup>32</sup> There are no direct ties left between the prisoner and the outside world. He feels so far removed from it that it is only in relation to the people who are still allowed to inhabit it that the outside world emerges before his eyes.

Even though Semprún's account is very particular, his description of an intense feeling of detachment does not represent an isolated case. In other accounts, this feeling is often related to descriptions that indicate such a strong intensification of the here-and-now that it is almost as if the world would shrink to its size. After some time inside a crammed wagon on the way to Birkenau, Elie Wiesel states for example: "The world had become a hermetically sealed cattle car."<sup>33</sup> The small space of confinement now delineates all that is left of the world; it literally is the world.<sup>34</sup>

After being subjected to a certain amount of fear, hunger, loss and pain, the prisoners find it hard to relate to any other reality than that of their immediate situation. Primo Levi writes:

Normandy and Russia were so far away, and the winter so near; hunger and desolation so concrete, and all the rest so unreal, that it did not seem possible that there could really exist any other world or time other than our world of mud and our sterile and stagnant time, whose ends we were by now incapable of imagining.<sup>35</sup>

The world the prisoners are experiencing is so acute and dominating that it blocks out everything else. Even though they still know of its existence, the outside world starts being unimaginable to them; it becomes "unreal."

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>33</sup> E. Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 24.

<sup>34</sup> The specific features of a train in motion are of importance here too. With the outside world moving and the inside at a relative standstill, a certain feeling of detachment is created *per se*.

<sup>35</sup> P. Levi, *If This Is a Man / The Truce* (London: Abacus, 1987), 122–23.

Another spatial aspect of the camp mentioned by prisoners was its extension and overpowering repetitiveness. Szmaglewska, who herself resorts to repetition when depicting the camp's monotonous expanse, writes about the "never-ending rows of barracks – rows of barracks – rows of barracks"<sup>36</sup> of Birkenau and describes their monotony with the words: "Everywhere behind the wires, as far as the eye can reach, series of the same pictures are repeated in but slightly changed editions: here women's corpses, there men's, there again men's, women's, and children's together."<sup>37</sup> The camp, which was designed to be endlessly expansible, constructed of grids and fields that simply had to be duplicated to further enlarge it,<sup>38</sup> seems to express a claim to a power all its own. As "far as the eye can reach," it surrounds the prisoners with its dominating principles. Thereby, it creates the illusion of being almost endless and all-encompassing. In Szmaglewska's text, the camp's magnitude comes to embody the Nazi's expansive policies and manifests a general entitlement that seems to aim at erasing the outside world.<sup>39</sup> Her description implies that to enter deeper into the camp signifies an increase in bondage. The spatial distance from the outside world is interpreted as a factor that intensifies the prisoner's hopelessness.<sup>40</sup> The bigger the camp becomes, the more power it seems to hold over its inmates.<sup>41</sup>

Just as Szmaglewska describes a growing spatial distance to the outside world as lowering the prisoners' hopes,<sup>42</sup> a closer proximity to it seems to strengthen the ability to believe in an alternative scenario. Halina Birenbaum writes about her experience during

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<sup>36</sup> S. Szmaglewska, *Smoke over Birkenau*, 184.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>38</sup> S. Endlich, "Die äußere Gestalt des Terrors," 224.

<sup>39</sup> S. Szmaglewska, *Smoke over Birkenau*, 33, 181.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 33, 181.

one of the working details close to a small hut that belonged to a nearby village: "The existence of life outside the camp, the sight of the bright sky and green fields alleviated the tragedy of the camp. [...] Here, in the open fields, closer to people's houses, it was easier to hope."<sup>43</sup> Also when the living conditions get slightly better, there seems to be a better chance of mentally keeping contact with the world that has been left behind.<sup>44</sup> Prisoners' accounts often describe how they were startled by the thought of an outside world that still obeyed the rules of their past lives. Birenbaum repeats a similar thought that bothered her while she was at Majdanek. She writes: "I just could not comprehend that there still existed another world, in which people were allowed to move around open spaces not cordoned off with barbed wire, and in which children played!"<sup>45</sup> Observed from her present situation in the camp, what used to be normal has turned into something unbelievable. A similar sense of astonishment can be found in the prisoner's reaction to the mere thought of Christmas preparations that might be taking place outside the camp:

How can you believe that in the cities and villages, blanketed with glistening snow, at the table in the circle of light from the lamp, the children are now bending their little heads over the Christmas tree ornaments they make for the approaching holiday?

What nonsense! Such a thing cannot exist! And if it does, it exists so far away, in a land irretrievably lost that it is better to forget. It is but some distant dream which will never return. Better forget and live the life of the barracks.<sup>46</sup>

The camp's reality is absolute to an extent that it tends to extinguish the validity of the outside world. What used to be normal,

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<sup>43</sup> H. Birenbaum, *Hope is the Last to Die* (Oświęcim, Poland: The Auschwitz Birkenau Museum, 1994), 111.

<sup>44</sup> T. Sobolewicz, *Aus der Hölle zurück. Von der Willkür des Überlebens im Konzentrationslager* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 2011), 95.

<sup>45</sup> H. Birenbaum, *Hope is the Last to Die*, 110.

<sup>46</sup> S. Szmaglewska, *Smoke over Birkenau*, 229.

is now rejected as impossible. If such a thing as Christmas within the family circle exists at all, the thought of it has to be metaphorically ex-territorialized to a degree that indicates its inaccessibility. Again, a topographical image is used to signify a gap that seems unbridgeable. A similar distance can be felt when Szmaglewska speaks of freedom as a different "country or planet."<sup>47</sup> It is literally a world away from the prisoner's current reality.

Another survivor who describes her difficulties in dealing with the incredible incongruity of the inside and the outside world is Ruth Klüger. Leaving Birkenau in a train, she looks at the countryside that is passing by and finds that this "normal" landscape seems as if it has become imaginary. The countryside looks so peaceful that she feels as if time had stood still and she was not just coming from Auschwitz.<sup>48</sup> The two worlds seem to be mutually exclusive. Klüger, who did not see the Silesian countryside on her way to the camp, is surprised to find that Auschwitz had not been situated on an alien<sup>49</sup> planet, but right in the middle of a real, inhabited country.<sup>50</sup> To her, the fundamental alien-ness of the camp<sup>51</sup> is incompatible with the normalcy of the outside world and she asks herself how the two conditions can exist simultaneously. How was it possible that there was such insouciance, such peace and beauty, while at the same time there was a place like Auschwitz?<sup>52</sup> How was it possible that people could have a home and feel at ease while elsewhere prisoners died and suffered every minute of the day? Interestingly, it seems as if Klüger's question is for the most part not an ethical one. It is really a question about the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>48</sup> R. Klüger, *weiter leben. Eine Jugend* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, 1995), 145.

<sup>49</sup> "Fremd" is used in the German original. This term can also be translated as "foreign," "strange," "unfamiliar," "different," "other."

<sup>50</sup> R. Klüger, *weiter leben*, 145.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 145.

co-existence of two conditions that conflict to such a degree that they cannot be thought of as sharing the same space. The monstrosity of the camp deviates so much from all that seemed possible that in reverse it has now rendered normalcy as seemingly impossible.

Klüger explains what she calls the “mystery of simultaneity” with another juxtaposition.<sup>53</sup> Traversing the country in the train, she passes a German summer camp. A young boy, waving a flag in what she interprets as an affirmative gesture to the system, comes to be the embodiment of this “other” side, the incomprehensibly light and beautiful side of the world. For him on the outside and for her on the inside, the train and the landscape, so she says, are in fact the same. At the same time, they represent two irreconcilable sides of the world.<sup>54</sup>

Combined with the isolation and seclusion of the camp, its extreme character and its incongruity with what the prisoners perceive as the normal world create an effect of incredibility that works both ways. Getting used to the absurd and unreal conditions of the camp,<sup>55</sup> prisoners find the (relative) normalcy of their former lives to become unbelievable. But as Arendt suggests, the same might apply vice versa. The hermetic sealing that separates the camp from the “world of the living” also leads to a certain sense of the unreal and incredible not only in reports, but probably also in the act of retrospection.<sup>56</sup> This very problem seems to reverberate in Levi’s words when he writes: “Today, at this very

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> J. Semprún, *The Cattle Truck*, 69.

<sup>56</sup> H. Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge Totaler Herrschaft*, 908. It has also to be taken into account that the so called “normalcy” was not intact in the outside world either. Correspondingly, for most of the surviving prisoners a return to the world they referred to as “normal” was not possible due to the vast changes brought about by the Nazis’ warfare and their aggressive policies. Nevertheless, the potential to render the “normal” life surreal, as well as the counter experience that made the camp reality seem incredible, is well worth noting.

moment as I sit writing at a table, I myself am not convinced that these things really happened."<sup>57</sup>

In this article, I have presented only a single facet of the spatial arrangements of the concentration camp as it was perceived and recorded by prisoners. To grasp the camp's very specific spatiality, however, one would have to address many more aspects, such as the internal mechanisms of spatial regulation and restriction, accessibility, spatially implemented forms of punishment and oppression, spatially sedimented hierarchies, processes of attribution of meaning, etc. Still, this approach to a space as "lived" and narrated, sheds light on the very specific, closed off, and condensed environment that was once the concentration camp and to which we no longer have access.

### Konfiguracje przestrzenne Auschwitz – wewnątrz i na zewnątrz kolczastych drutów

#### Streszczenie

Na podstawie wspomnień byłych więźniów Auschwitz oraz tekstów literackich opartych na osobistych przeżyciach ich twórców, autorka artykułu rekonstruuje subiektywnie odczuwaną przez nich przestrzeń obozu. Zwracając szczególną uwagę na aspekty tego, co „wewnątrz” i tego co, „na zewnątrz”, opisuje przestrzenne doświadczenia więźniów, takie jak poczucie totalnej izolacji i nierealności świata zewnętrznego. Zdaniem autorki analiza tego typu doświadczenia umożliwia głębsze zrozumienie złożonej rzeczywistości obozu, która dla ludzi zwiedzających muzeum jest niedostępna.

**Słowa kluczowe:** narracja, doświadczenie przestrzeni, obóz zagłady, Auschwitz-Birkenau

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<sup>57</sup> P. Levi, *If This Is a Man / The Truce*, 109.