

**Paper presented at the 7th European Social Science History Conference,
Feb. 26 – March 1, 2008**

Panel: ORA21: Mauthausen in Transnational Memories and Narrations, 26 Feb., 16:30



LUDWIG BOLTZMANN INSTITUTE FOR HISTORICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE, c/o UNIV. OF
VIENNA, SPITALGASSE 2-4/ I. HOF, A-1090 VIENNA

PIOTR FILIPKOWSKI

p.filipkowski@karta.org.pl

KARTA Center, Warsaw, Poland

Institut of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences

Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Historical Social Science

Polish Mauthausen Narratives across Time and Context

KARTA Center – an NGO responsible for the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project in Poland – conducted over 160 interviews with Mauthausen survivors. I have just completed dissertation in biographical sociology in which I analyze over 50 recordings from this sample for my analysis – 30 of them I had conducted myself.

In my research I wanted to take advantage of the fact that what we have collected in MSDP are – in the first place – (auto)biographical narratives and not factual reports on camp reality (however the latter might be an important by-product of them). Such an approach makes me put emphasis on processual and dynamic character of survivors' (camp) experiences. Referring to theoretical concepts proposed by such interpretive biographical sociologists as Norman Denzin and Fritz Schütze, I am looking for the most characteristic, most 'typical' **Polish Mauthausen trajectories**. Trajectory – a term borrowed from Schütze – means a phase of life, in which the individual is overwhelmed by external conditions, circumstances, processes and is hardly able (or completely unable) to act, to gain control over reality. These new situation causes suffering and cannot be overcome. When it lasts long – like camp imprisonment – different strategies of adaptation are slowly developed. Those who did not develop them, did not survive.

What occurred to be a good unifying characteristic that helps recognize various Polish Mauthausen trajectories, various "types" of narratives/ experiences is the **cause and duration of imprisonment** in the camp. Taken straightforwardly it seems to be just one of many points

of reference. Nevertheless I think it is a useful tool that helps notice and gather several other characteristics and distinctions among Polish Mauthausen survivors. These different trajectories (with all attempts/ strategies of overcoming them) can be related to the biographical situation ‘there and then’, that is: before and during camp imprisonment. But they can be also related to the narrative level, to autobiographical story ‘here and now’, that is: in the process of interviewing.

Let me finally indicate three major “types” of Polish Mauthausen experience, three most distinctive trajectories I recognized in my analyzes. They show – at the same time – different ways of constructing autobiographical narratives. I will conclude each “type” with a short passage from the interview significant for it.

1. **The first trajectory** – experiences of these Polish survivors who were imprisoned in camps of the Mauthausen system from 1940 till liberation in May 1945; so called “**low numbers**”, or “**old prisoners**”.

There were several thousand Poles sent to Mauthausen and/or Gusen in the spring 1940. Most of them were arrested in the frames of so called: *Preventive Aktion gegen polnische Intelligenz*. There were mostly intellectuals in this group: teachers, lawyers, doctors, priests and students of church seminars, students and university professors, etc. Only few percent of that group survived. We conducted about 20 interviews with these ‘long term prisoners’.

What is characteristic for their narratives? For me the most important thing is that their camp experience — due to its length and continuity — is somehow incorporated into broader life story as a *period of life*. Distinctive stages are usually recalled; the most important and often repeated are: arrest and stay in an assembly camp, quarantine in Dachau or Sachsenhausen, transport to Gusen and work in commandos building the camp, then – usually – as *Steinmetzers*, *Bohrers* or in similar, stone-cutting related groups, finally in armament industry or in another securer, more “profitable job”. However so few are still alive (and so few survived the camp) these is the only group that stress so much – often with some pride – that Gusen was called *Vernichtungslager für die Polnische Intelligenz*. They often say that Gusen, was a “Polish camp” — despite its multinational character it is stressed that at the beginning of its functioning majority of prisoners were Poles. However for some of them the whole period of imprisonment is monotonous, continuous and ‘empty’ in any significant episodes, it is integrated into their life course as a slowly developing but dynamic process. In a way narration about it is more similar to narration on “ordinary”, “outside the camp” experiences, what makes the picture more complicated.

There are many different camp's institutions mentioned (legal and illegal) in which interviewees really participated or at least witnessed: cultural activities, sport, political disputes among prisoners and common prayers, singing songs in choir, etc. All of them are seen as important factors that played similar role — they constituted a substitute of “real” social world and weakened the pressure of the camp's reality.

Another important factor is the age of inmates in that group (more then 20 at the beginning of imprisonment) and simple fact that for them war memories and camp memories mean the same (apart from the engagement in October campaign in 1939 of many of them). And it is usually Gusen were they were imprisoned, sometimes Mauthausen and Gusen. It means they stayed in one place for several years. It was long enough – for those who survived – to learn how to endure, how to adapt, how to maneuver... Long enough to master many rules of the game in the camp – rules of social interactions there. Surviving is a good proof of mastering such skills.

Another characteristic of this “type” of narratives is their authors' ability to see different stages, various periods of camp's functioning.

Several further points significant and reoccurring in these “type” of stories:

- meeting older prisoner – German social-democrats or communists (especially in Dachau, Sachsenhausen) who
- gradual becoming old number, overcoming trajectory and – at the end – giving help to the others who came later to the camp
- longer narrative on the period, when they were at the bottom, shorter – when their situation improved, when they
- extraordinary experience of being shifted or “evacuated” to Mauthausen after staying many years in Auschwitz – sudden loss of privileged position, falling down in camp's hierarchy, starting again from *zugang's* position, however with big experience and some social capitals that could used quickly to provide quick advance.
- “difficult” memories of those who were released from the camp before liberation – as experience of being released does not fit to the master narrative on the camp.

Case 1: Citation from a “**patriotic story**” of **Leon Ceglarz**, born in 1914, teacher, army officer, in Gusen from 1940 till liberation:

“In the camp I did not belong to the prominent group, but I was standing there, in that open door and I was listening those beautiful poems [others were reciting]. And that was something that strengthened me a lot, that strengthened my personal conviction, that I have to

survive. And one more thing: I left 4-weeks old baby, I left my mother that I loved so much, who had brought me up. I left my loving wife, I left the whole family. And finally I left Poland, the country for which I was fighting, whose youth I was educating. I wanted to come back... To want means to be able to.../ That's a stereotypical sentence, but in that case it was necessary. Want to survive. Do not I am aware that I myself/ or my other colleagues, who survived, they survived on the cost of the others – those who died. There is no doubt about it. But am I...? But I am not directly guilty for that. I am not and the others who survived are not as well. If the best survived? No. If justice won? No.”

2. **The second trajectory** – experiences of these prisoners who arrived at the camp in later years (1942-3) and stayed till the end. They were imprisoned in **punishment for “misbehavior”**. This second group is the most diverse – there are inmates whose war experiences are complicated and their narratives have many strands of the plot. Imprisonment in camps of the Mauthausen system is preceded by arrest, imprisonment in Gestapo jails, sometimes trials in German courts. Mauthausen is usually the last stop on their way through several camps. It is also characteristic for their narration that recollections from Mauthausen are mixed with memories of other experiences.

Despite such a diversity, there is something characteristic for their camp narrative – it is positioned within a broader context of “adventures” one went through during the war. It “makes sense” as a consequence of previous episodes and as final punishment for “misbehavior”. The latter was – at least to some extent – rooted in free decision.

Two main sub-groups of inmates can be distinguished here.

A) those who actively engaged in resistance, were then captured, kept in jails, often cruelly interrogated, went through many camps. Despite inhuman conditions and thanks to unexpected coincidences that might have taken place (meeting another Polish inmates that gave help, receiving parcels, working in better commando – like those in armament industry – or meeting “good Germans”, etc), imprisonment in camps of Mauthausen structure is often seen by them as a kind of relief – in subjective relation to other experienced sufferings. Especially if they got support in the camp from ‘older’ colleagues in the camp, what was usually the case. They – and only they (and probably not all of them) – were Polish political prisoners in strict sense.

B) those who were taken to the camp from forced work in agriculture (“*bei Bauer*” as it is usually referred) in the Third Reich – for disobedience or after unsuccessful attempt of escape. Their camp stories are usually much less successful stories in comparison to “resistance

fighters” (point a above). They recall more often falling down than climbing up in camp’s hierarchy. Their stories seem specific in few other points:

- they are often non-heroic, non-patriotic (in this basic sense)
- they are a-historical, non-chronological
- they reflect experiences of solitude, lack of social capitals and social support in the camp
- these survivors very seldom participate in any kind of commemoration activities, rituals
- they have never been to the memorial after liberation

In this “middle”, so differentiated group or “type” you can well observe how social inequalities, tensions, distances, hierarchies were brought to the camp from the outside and strengthened there. They did not disappear after the war as well.

Case 2A: Citation from ‘**adventurous story**’ of **Zygmunt Podhalański**, born 1921, engaged in resistance, arrested and interrogated by Gestapo, in February 1943 arrested, imprisoned by gestapo, interrogated and send to Birkenau, in 1944 moved to Mauthausen, then to Linz I, later to Linz III:

“I always stress one thing: I do not know by what a miracle I am still alive. I do not know whom should I be thankful that I am alive. That can be one lucky accident, second lucky accident, third lucky accident. But I had really too many of them”.

3. **The third trajectory** – experiences of those, who came to Mauthausen in autumn 1944 – most of them during or after Warsaw Uprising, but they were 12-15 years old civilians, not soldiers. The third “type” is represented by the majority of those who are still alive. The reason why this group is the biggest lies in biology – they are the youngest.

Detained in Warsaw (often with other family members) were sent to the assembly camp, after few days there were transported to concentration camps or to forced labour. Some of them to Mauthausen (via Auschwitz-Birkenau or directly). What is characteristic and common for their experience? It was — much more then in other groups of Polish inmates — shocking, absolutely strange and incomparable with anything these young people had known before.

Until 1944 they were usually living under protection of their parents (families), too much extend isolated from the war. Until summer 1944 it was still possible for many people in Warsaw to live their lives and bring up children as if the war was far away (not for Jews of

course). The more it was like that, the more striking was confrontation with concentration camp – extremely overcrowded and severe at this time (the highest date rate). These young people had no chance to survive, if older inmates did not support them. But it was not possible to afford help for everyone. Feeling of solitude is mentioned in many narratives, while other stress their experience of “being chosen” for support.

Disoriented, lost, shifted to subcamps and then back to Mauthausen in death marches, they had rather no chance to build closer, longer-lasting relations with other inmates. Many of them were falling down very quickly – usually stayed many weeks in camp *reviers*, some were not able to go out of barracks several weeks before (and after) liberation.

Confrontation with the camp was not only astonishing experience for these young inmates – it was “out of the blue” biographical clash — sudden, unexpected, external and incomprehensible stroke from the outside that strongly influenced their whole lives. It was a crucial biographical turning point. And today – strong point of reference, important source of identification. Today this group of camp survivors is the one that feels responsible for the survivors’ milieu, for commemorating, for organizing annual trip to the memorial, sometimes also for taking care of the older prisoners.

These “Warsaw” narratives are often more dramatic than those of other inmates. They authors seem to be more traumatized. It was often much more difficult to survive the last few months in the camp, than few years there. Sounds completely absurd, but does not have to be, if you try to keep closer to their narratives than to common-sense.

Within this third “type” there are also stories of women – and young girls – that were sent to Mauthausen in these “Warsaw transports” to spend several weeks in a tent camp located outside walls of Mauthausen main camp. From there they were later sent to various forced kind of forced labours – usually in industry or in services.

Case 3: Citation from a ‘**traumatic story**’ of **Roman Strój**, born 1929, detained in the first days of the Uprising in September 1944, taken to assembly-transit camp in Pruszków by Warsaw and sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, from there to Mauthausen, then to Wien–Schwechat, in spring 1945 back to Mauthausen in death march. After liberation was unable to move, stayed in few hospitals for several months, then – another few months – in DP camps in Regensburg and Wetzlar. He came back to Poland in 1946, active in Warsaw Club of Mauthausen Survivors. His ‘traumatic story’ has many passages similar to the following:

“It is clear that Häftlings [prisoners] like me and similar to me were in the worst situation. As we came from the Uprising, the old prisoners were laughing that we came only at the end.

As if it was their advantage there had been rotting there for 5 years. Oh, they were rotting, but they were also living. And we did not know if we would live till the next day”.

And one more passage from the same narrative:

“After the camp I thought that survivors would be – if not a specific group in the society – they would be different people. They survived this hell. And I thought... never mind they are at work, as ministers, as directors, as workers.....never mind in which position in the hierarchy, they would be, they would be good people. Shit! Not true! Nothing [like that] happened.”

*

The above “typology” stresses differences, especially social differences, among various groups of Polish Mauthausen survivors. There is – of course – big sphere of experiences which are common for all, or most of, narratives of Polish camp survivors. Many are probably “universal” for all former Mauthausen inmates, or even more generally: for all camp survivors, irrespectively where they come from and how long they were imprisoned.

But what I wanted to do here, was to shed some light on several specifics and distinctions within just one group of Mauthausen survivors, namely among Polish survivors. To be more precise – among these, relatively not many, whom we managed to interview within MSDP over sixty years after liberation of the camp.

However all these survivors were imprisoned in the same concentration camp, they were all Polish political prisoners and they “digested” their experiences within the same collective (national) memory they stories – in their form and content – are importantly different. They show various trajectories, various ways of experiencing, enduring and digesting camp ‘episode’ in individuals’ biographies.

‘Full’ life stories narrated and recorded in MSDP allow us to see our interviewees’ camp experiences and narratives in wider biographical and socio-cultural contexts. In my research, I tried to apply such wider perspective. Maybe this approach could be treated as a useful example – among many others, I hope – how to focus our efforts in the new Mauthausen Survivors Research Project.