

Homo Holocaustus,¹ or Autobiographical Female Experience of the Holocaust²

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to present the motif of the Shoah in female autobiographical prose after the year 2000. The paper shows that, in recent years, more and more female authors in the second and third post-Holocaust generations have been recording their traumatic experience, and that the reason for it lies in the social stigmatization of Jewish people. It is stressed here that the issues of the Holocaust are part and parcel of a cultural taboo and – similarly to female written prose – they are frequently ignored or evaluated negatively. The Holocaust issues are tackled by contemporary young writers of Jewish descent who – contrary to the previous generation authors – have not experienced the mass murder of Jews; nevertheless, they feel its effects today. This paper proves that the research into trauma studies is not really conducted in Poland, and paying attention to a female viewpoint is very rare. The examples referred to in the paper of the autobiographical novels by Ewa Kuryluk, Agata Tuszyńska, Roma Ligocka and Magdalena Tulli demonstrate that this kind of writing is becoming more and more important within the literature focused on the Shoah. Compared to the autobiographical fiction by Marek Bieńczyk, Jan Tomasz Gross and Michał Głowiński, female Holocaust stories are distinguished

¹ This expression, coined in imitation of *homo sapiens*, symbolizes the new type of a human, who was born after the end of World War II, and absorbed the experience of those Polish Jews who had experienced the trauma of the Holocaust.

² The term “Holocaust” is translated in a number of ways, but here it will be understood as “a burnt sacrifice or destruction, especially by fire”, with the emphasis on the voluntariness of the sacrifice made, in contrast to the Shoah, which “as a recorded wording [...] does not belong to any known language [and is] an artificial construction from beyond the realm of the written language,” and “means the *extermination, the time of the extermination of European Jews, the suffering and death of Jewish people,*” whose sacrifice was not voluntary, but initiated by Nazi Germany. Moreover, “the Holocaust is considered by many researchers as the most radical form of genocide, [but the very term Holocaust] began to be associated with the extermination of European Jews only between 1957 and 1959.” Still, some scholars claim that the term „was used already during the war by some writers describing what was happening to Jews.” See: T. Kotłowski, “Holocaust – geneza, przebieg, skutki,” in: *Zagłada. Współczesne problemy rozumienia i przedstawiania*, edited by P. Czapliński, E. Domańska, Poznań: Wydawnictwo “Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne,” 2009, pp. 29-39; W. Panas, “Szoah w literaturze polskiej,” in: *Świadectwa i powroty nieludzkiego czasu*, edited by J. Święch, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 1990, pp. 42-43; A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Holocaust. Problemy przedstawiania*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2005, pp. 11-25.

by their authenticity, emotionality, intimacy and honesty of narration. The stories are devoid of any pathos, and they highlight the figure of a mother. Moreover, their confessions are based on the physical feeling of the legacy which has remained in their hearts and minds after the trauma that their loved ones had to experience. An attempt to describe prose post-Holocaust prose is made in comparison to Jewish literature in Poland, drawing the reader's attention to the characteristic features of these issues compared to the autobiographical works by men.

Keywords: Shoah, women, autobiographical writings, female prose

“Holocaust fiction smacks of scandal,”³ observes Sue Vice.⁴ It does so especially in Poland, which, for many years now, has been grappling with the national trauma of World War II, the trauma which has been bequeathed in perpetuity to the whole society by Holocaust victims and survivors. The label of scandal has also stuck to Polish female prose, which – since 1989 – has often been put in the pigeonhole of “market-oriented stories for women, imperfect little works, limited-edition trifles.”⁵ Because of the pigeonholing, marginalizing and downgrading of female written literature, the public perceive it as embarrassing and second-rate even today.

“Women’s charge into literature”⁶ was an event widely commented on,⁷ which became immediately associated with pejorative labels. The “sins of female prose, from the very beginning [...],” included: “sentimentality, emotionality, painstakingness, excessive detail, but also preoccupation with physiology, obscenity and menstruation.”⁸ One must not forget that female literature focuses not only on stunning with physicality and is not only about embarrassing the reader with taboo topics, but equally often deals with the themes discarded by male writers or approaches them from a different angle. The effect of combining female prose with aggressive feminism and giving it

³ All the quotations from Polish sources have been translated by Piotr Cymbalista.

⁴ S. Vice, “Literatura Holocaustu,” translated by T. Dobrogoszcz, *Literatura na Świecie* 2005 (9–10), p. 251.

⁵ A. Mroziak, “Feminokracja? Recepcja polskiej prozy kobiecej po 1989 roku,” in: *Literatura zaangażowana – koncepcje, programy, realizacje. Czy potrzebna nowa definicja?* edited by E. Ziętek-Maciejczyk, P. Cieliczka, Warszawa: Fundacja na rzecz Badań Literackich. Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2006, p. 96.

⁶ This quotation from the paper by Joanna Rewaj is used here to refer to the female revolution which occurred in Polish literature after 1989. See: J. Rewaj: “Manuela, Izabela, Natasza, czyli ‘babu runęły w literaturę,’” *Pogranicza* 1997 (2).

⁷ The specificity of female literature after 1989 has been addressed, e.g. by: Przemysław Czapliński (*Ślady przelomu. O prozie polskiej 1976-1996*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997; *Ruchome marginesy. Szkice o literaturze lat 90*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2002), Dominika Materska, Ewa Popiołek (“Tkaczki i dziwaczki.” *Wiadomości Kulturalne* 1995 [37], p. 12), Roman Praszynski (“Tylko dla mężczyzn,” *Nowy Nurt* 1994 [16], pp. 1, 6), Andrzej Zieniewicz (“Babski przelom,” *Wiadomości Kulturalne* 1995 [29], p. 11), Barbara Zwoleńska (*Polska proza i poezja po 1989 roku wobec tradycji*, edited by A. Głowczewski, M. Wróblewski, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2007).

⁸ A. Mroziak, “Feminokracja?...” p. 99.

the ridiculed label of *gender studies* was that "quarrels about gender identity and female subjectivity"⁹ obscured the true colour of Polish female writers' output. "Pejorative labels, such as 'chick lit', 'menstrual' or 'feminist', openly questioned the value of such literature and ruled out its positive aspects."¹⁰

Following old patterns, men dominate literature even in the 21st century and are credited with Creating,¹¹ while passive imitation is deemed a female thing. Treating women writers and their output in a mocking way has made many recipients believe that this is the literature in which "the exhibitionistic gestures of the narrator"¹² are focused only on "emphasizing [...] the physical, with descriptions of 'the bloody hell of childbirth and miscarriage'"¹³ or intimacy intertwined with mawkish romance. Given such an understanding of female written literature, its original meaning (which the critics and scholars favourably inclined towards such prose¹⁴ tried to emphasize despite the critical labels which had become recorded in the readers' reception) has faded away.

It has been forgotten that, in literature, women have set out mainly to seek their own individuality, discarded identity as a category entangled in the discourse of power, revised the previous roles and figures of women in the national community and, above all, repeatedly "tried to create a separate mythology – of family, space and individual, attempting to fill in the void lying between the religious and daily dimensions of the world, the future and present, dream and reality."¹⁵ Understanding female prose in this way makes the readers notice also (besides light novels by Katarzyna Grochola, Izabela Sowa or Monika Szwaja, where the heroine is made a Polish Bridget Jones)¹⁶ the female written prose addressing themes important to the dominant media discourse or those omitted as embarrassing or related to a cultural taboo.

⁹ A. Mrozik, *Akuszerki transformacji. Kobiety, literatura i władza w Polsce po 1989 roku*, Warszawa: Pro Cultura Litteraria. Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2012, p. 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹¹ A capital letter has been used here deliberately, in imitation of the male-written high Literature, often spelt with a capital L, with female written literature belittled as secondary and puerile. See, *inter alia*, *ibid.*

¹² G. Borkowska, "Wyskrobać starą zaprawę z pomnika polskiej literatury...". O 'młodej' prozie kobiecej," *Teksty Drugie* 1996 (5), p. 55.

¹³ A. Mrozik, "Feminokracja?...", p. 101.

¹⁴ Attempts to define female literature have been made, *inter alia*, by: Maria Janion, Grażyna Borkowska and Ewa Kraskowska, each time stressing women's involvement in the themes omitted or marginalized in Polish literature. See: G. Borkowska, "Metafora drożdży. Co to jest literatura/poezja kobieca," *Teksty Drugie* 1995 (3-4), pp. 31-44; M. Janion, *Kobiety i duch inności*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 1996; E. Kraskowska, "O tak zwanej 'kobiecości' jako konwencji literackiej," in: *Krytyka feministyczna – siostra teorii i historii literatury*, edited by G. Borkowska, L. Sikorska, Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2004, pp. 203–204.

¹⁵ G. Borkowska, "Wyskrobać starą zaprawę z pomnika polskiej literatury...", p. 63.

¹⁶ The term quoted after Agnieszka Mrozik's book: *Akuszerki transformacji*.

In Poland, the subject of the Holocaust and Shoah is such a theme – continually present in media and literature, but deemed troublesome. Jewish motifs appeared in prose in the aftermath of the war and concentration camp experience. Once among the central themes in Polish literature, such motifs were pushed to the periphery when communist Poland's literature became highly politicized and a political campaign against Jewish citizens began; leaving that periphery might have caused public denunciation and definite disapproval on the part of the authorities and society.

After the war, parents' attitudes often percolated into the generation of children, or even grandchildren, which was helped by the silence about the Holocaust on the part of the educational system and other institutions moulding historical awareness. Yet, there was one more factor, namely the large-scale absence of Jews from the post-war ethnic landscape of Poland, which resulted in the actual inability to counter the negative stereotypes about Jews in the situation when two thirds (i.e. the vast majority) of the Shoah survivors left Poland within the first three years after the war. The reason for that was their sense of lacking security.¹⁷

Today, attempts are made to overcome the bashfulness that has amassed around Jewish themes. After years of silence, both men and women return to the motif of the Shoah, which proves to continue also in the generations who have not experienced it directly, but learnt about it through the trauma and the brand of Jewishness left on their mother or father.

Discussing the issues of the identity of Jews in Poland became possible after the change of the political system in 1989, when public discourse opened to such issues as the Holocaust understood as an experience concerning the Jewish community, the politically controlled antisemitism at the time of communist Poland or the events in March 1968 and their aftermath in Polish cultural and public life. In this context, especially interesting are the literary testimonies of the second and third generation of Polish Jews rescued from the Holocaust, who, in their narrations, set out to define their own national identity in relation to their parents' traumatic experience, and, at the same time, in contrast to Polishness, Polish stereotypes and national myths.¹⁸

As early as in the 1980s,¹⁹ an increased interest in the Holocaust issues²⁰ could be observed, which reached its high point in the 1990s and has its

¹⁷ F. Tych, "Potoczna świadomość Holocaustu w Polsce – jej stan i postulaty edukacyjne," in: *Zagłada. Współczesne problemy rozumienia i...*, p. 42.

¹⁸ A. Szczepan, "Polski dyskurs posttraumatyczny. Literatura polska ostatnich lat wobec Holocaustu i tożsamości żydowskiej," in: *Kultura po przejściach, osoby z przeszłością. Polski dyskurs postzależnościowy – konteksty i perspektywy badawcze*, Vol. 1, edited by R. Nycz, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2011, p. 240.

¹⁹ "The revival of the Holocaust subject occurred in the 1980s, when the interest in the Polish-Jewish past was a sign of resistance to communist lies." As regards the authors taking up the Holocaust theme in the 1970s and 1980s, Sławomir Buryła mentions, *inter alia*, Jerzy Ofierski, Barbara Nawrocka-Dońska, Józef Kazimierz Wroniszewski, Jadwiga Mauer and Włodzimierz Paźniewski. See: H. Grynberg, "Holocaust jako nowe doświadczenie literackie," in: *Pamięć Shoah. Kulturowe reprezentacje i praktyki upamiętnienia*, edited by T. Majewski, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Oficyna, 2011, p. 792; S. Buryła, *Opisać Zagładę. Holocaust w twórczości Henryka Grynberga*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2006, p. 18.

²⁰ According to Władysław Panas, the "older generation" of authors using the Jewish motifs are, *inter alia*, Bruno Schulz, Debora Vogel, Mieczysław Braun, Stefania Ney, Adolf

"second youth" today.²¹ Still, although free market economy and the commercialization of Polish literature facilitate taking up sensitive or mysterious subjects, and provocation and revealing intimate details of one's life have become a kind of typical trait of contemporary literature, the Holocaust still continues to cause perplexity. Nevertheless, having Jewish ancestors has become popular in recent years. Marcin Kołodziejczyk writes:

searching for Jewish origins is becoming popular in Poland, as well as discovering Jewish culture, history and religion. Some people try to answer the fundamental question: who am I? Others only dabble in the fashion for Jewishness, waiting for a new craze [...]. According to the 2002 census, the official number of Jews in Poland was 1100. That was not true – instead, it possibly showed what notion about Poland people of Jewish descent had because, at the same time, more than three thousand people were members of Jewish organizations, though they did not admit to Jewish ancestry in public. They were said to be the older generation who 'went into hiding' after the state-controlled anti-Jewish harassment and expulsions in March 1968 [...]. What is certain is that the history of Poland has never seen such a revival of the interest in Jewishness.²²

Jewish descent has become popular, but the problem of the Holocaust is often commented on only with awkward silence or references to the national trauma which became peculiarly sanctified after World War II. Although the article by Kołodziejczyk was widely discussed and accused of numerous inaccuracies,²³ it still reveals a certain trend which has been present in Poland for several years and associated, even in literature, with the kitsch convention.²⁴

Rudnicki, Henryk Grynberg, Artur Sandauer, Mieczysław Jastrun. See: W. Panas, "Szoah w literaturze polskiej...", pp. 42–43.

²¹ According to Józef Olejniczak, the authors of the Holocaust literature after 1898 include: Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz (*Umschlagplatz*), Michał Głowiński (*Czarne sezony*), Hanna Krall (*Tam już nie ma rzeki*), Jan Tomasz Gross (*Sąsiedzi*), Marek Bieńczyk (*Tworci*), Piotr Szewc (*Zmierzchy i poranki*), Paweł Heulle (*Weiser Dawidek*) and Henryk Grynberg (*Dziedzictwo, Żydowska wojna, Kadisz*). Przemysław Czapliński extends the foregoing list with the following names: Ida Fink (*Ślady*), Piotr Matywiecki (*Kamień graniczny*), Adam Sikora (*Szczęściarz*), Cecel Perechodnik (*Czy ja jestem mordercą?*), Roman Gren (*Krajobraz z dzieckiem*) and Wilhelm Dichter (*Koń Pana Boga*). Moreover, Czapliński points to the year 1985 as the "turning point," when *Shoah*, the film by Claude Lanzmann was shown for the first time, and 1990, the year when Ida Fink's *Podróż* was published. See: P. Czapliński, "Zagłada – niedokończona narracja polskiej nowoczesności," in: *Ślady obecności*, edited by S. Buryła, A. Molisak, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2010, p. 356; J. Olejniczak, "Śmierć masowa mówiła w jidysz...", in: *Nowe dwudziestolecie (1989-2009). Rozpoznania, hierarchie, perspektywy*, edited by H. Gosk, Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2010, p. 175.

²² M. Kołodziejczyk, "Moda na żydowskość. Powrót Żydów," *Polityka* 2014. <http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/spoleczenstwo/1596469,1,moda-na-zydowskosc.read> [accessed on: 20.11.2014].

²³ See: A. Graff, "Moda na Żydów?," *Wysokie Obcasy* 2014. http://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/1,96856,16953080,Moda_na_Zydow_.html [accessed on: 20.11.2014]; P. Forecki, A. Zawadzka, "Od antysemityzmu do Żydów." *Dziennik opinii* 2014. <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/artykuly/opinie/20141104/forecki-zawadzka-od-antysemityzmu-do-zydow> [accessed on: 20.11.2014].

²⁴ See: S. Buryła, "(Nie)banalnie o Zagładzie," in: *Mody w kulturze i literaturze popularnej*, edited by S. Buryła, L. Gąsowska, D. Ossowska, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2011, pp. 139–172.

Atheism, agnosticism or New Age are no longer in fashion. Today, if you want to shine in society, you must declare interest in Jewish culture. Participating in Jewish music concerts, Jewish culture festivals, Judaist festivities or carrying pseudo-cabbalistic red strings on your wrist becomes the proof of your keeping abreast of the fashion that is gradually getting more and more popular also in Poland. "Young people who want to be fashionable wonder: should I become a Jew or a gay, or perhaps both?" jokes Artur Hofman, president of the Social and Cultural Association of Jews in Poland.²⁵

The fashion for Jewishness is compared by Tomasz Terlikowski to the interest in atheism, agnosticism or New Age. This juxtaposition illustrates the dimension acquired by the interest in Jewish themes today: a passing superficial fashion, not for learning about the traumatic past of Jews, but only a temporary fascination with "what has any link with Jewishness, whether this or another."²⁶ Anyway, the connotation with the word "fashion" is extremely unfair to the culture and traditions of many generations of Jews. Still, being a Jew, as well as a hipster or a punk, is trendy. Ela Sidi, a translator and a graphic artist, asks this question:

Where does this unfaltering interest in Jews come from in contemporary Poland? Does it come from the nostalgia for the multicultural, ethnically varied and multi-national Poland, or is it the proof of a positive change in the attitude to Jews? Are Poles really waiting for the return of Jews to Poland, are they ready to sign their names under the "I am missing you, Jew" line [...]? While some Poles try their best to find their Jewish ancestry, some Polish Jews distrust "the fashion for Jews" and are deliberately hiding their background. Usually, they are those who (or whose parents or grandparents) survived the Shoah "on the Aryan side" themselves and have not stopped using their fictitious identity, paying a high price for it.²⁷

It may be deduced that Jewish background is trendy only to those who associate Jewishness with yet another subculture of our times. Although Rafał Naturski believes that "Jewishness is not about showing off,"²⁸ it is hard to deny that being a Jew today or, rather, trying to identify with Jewish culture, is somewhat spectacular and artificial. Today, a Jew is becoming a celebrity, so revealing one's Jewish descent is expedient.²⁹

The fashion for Jewishness stands in contrast to the silence about the Holocaust, referred to not as much by Polish media and stage celebrities, as by writers, for whom Jewish descent was not a means of promoting

²⁵ T.P. Terlikowski, U. Bieniecka, M. Rogowicz, "POPjudaizm," *Wprost* 2008 (8). <http://www.wprost.pl/ar/141195/POPjudaizm/> [accessed on: 20.11.2014].

²⁶ A. Graff, "Moda na Żydów?...", http://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokieobcasy/1,96856,16953080,Moda_na_Zydow_.html [accessed on: 20.11.2014].

²⁷ E. Sidi, "Moda na Żydów," <http://gojka.blog.onet.pl/2014/03/25/moda-na-zydow/> [accessed on: 20.11.2014].

²⁸ R. Naturski, "Nowa moda w Polsce – chcemy być Żydami," <http://facet.wp.pl/kat,70996,wid,16643789,wiadomosc.html?ticaid=113fd9> [accessed on: 20.11.2014].

²⁹ Their Jewish ancestry has been recently revealed by, *inter alia*, Michał Piróg and Andrzej Morozowski. Piróg turned his "coming out" into a media show, confessing the secret in Kuba Wojewódzki's popular talk show. Morozowski admits that "talking about the Jewish background has become a sort of youthful showing off for him [...], and being Jewish is even becoming fashionable in certain circles." See: <http://facet.wp.pl/kat,70996,wid,16643789,wiadomosc.html?ticaid=113fd9> [accessed on: 20.11.2014].

oneself on the literary market, but a trauma and legacy from the wartime generations,³⁰ which brings back shame and humiliation instead of pride. Agnieszka Graff writes:

Few grew up in Jewish homes; most of them are "discoverers," [whose coming out is] a costly interruption of silence. The usual scenario is that "the Jewish secret" surfaces at some point of the family life only to vanish again. And then, people somehow return to "the secret." They dig, browse, ask questions. Sometimes, elderly people start saying things, but then they withdraw. All this is accompanied – no need to say it – by lots of tension, pain and fear. Behind the alleged fashion, there are dramas and traumas which have not been talked about for decades. Polish Jews in the younger generation differ greatly: in how they learnt about their ancestry and reacted to the news, in the number of Jewish ancestors and the degree of kinship, in their age and consequent distance from the Shoah. We differ in our attitudes to Judaism, the Israeli state, Poland and Polish politics, but what we have in common – besides several organizations, public initiatives and social contacts – is the feeling that we are at home here despite our Jewish origins. Despite – as the context here is anti-Semitism, still popular in Poland, a sea of dislike and suspicion, refusal to face the history. Pictures of a Jew with a coin are not funny to us, though their ubiquity is judged differently.³¹

It is "anti-Semitism, still popular in Poland" that sentences Jews to silence. We are still a nation in which stereotypes win against rational arguments. Despite that, we are still a nation in which the sense of guilt is rooted, inherited from our ancestors. "The Shoah has never disappeared from Polish culture,"³² but:

as a result of "the past," i.e. pre-war anti-Semitism, we were indifferent to the fate of Jews during the war. As a result of indifference, which made it easier for Germans to perpetrate the Shoah, we feel partial guilt. Still, we do not want to hear this, since Polish collective identity is based on the fanaticism of innocence. Our self-creation is about purity and honour, and presenting ourselves as victims or victim protectors. Such an attitude cannot be reconciled with the historical truth, so "tricky" issues – such as the Shoah – are pushed into the underground of social communication.³³

While Czapliński's opinion is brutal, and history teaches us that hundreds of Poles helped Jews,³⁴ one cannot judge his conclusion to be untrue, which is

³⁰ Post-war trauma was qualified as a medical condition in 1980, when "the American Psychiatric Association introduced into the mental disorder classification system applied in the USA a new disease named Post Traumatic Stress Disorder [...], which comprised: 'imprinting of death,' fear of death, sense of guilt related to death, apathy, suspicion, distrust, unfocused anger, as well as searching for the meaning and sense of the traumatic event." A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Holocaust...*, pp. 52–53.

³¹ A. Graff, "Moda na Żydów..." These words may be complemented with those of Kinga Dunin, who notes that "the literature directly related to the Holocaust is the domain of the writers of Jewish origin, which gives it a specific character of testimony." See: A. Graff, *Czytając Polskę. Literatura po roku 1989 wobec dylematów nowoczesności*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2004, p. 145.

³² P. Czapliński, *Zagłada – nieskończona narracja...*, p. 337.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

³⁴ Irena Sendlerowa is the greatest symbol of Polish assistance to Jews. However, besides her, there were thousands of anonymous Poles who selflessly saved Jews during the Shoah. "Jan Błoński writes that anti-Semitism in Poland was free from any murderous tendencies due to the influence of Catholicism. In this sense, God protected Poles from being involved

confirmed by Zygmunt Bauman, saying that “Polish Jews were slaughtered by the occupying forces before the eyes of Polish people, thus making them face moral dilemmas unknown to the majority of the nations conquered by Nazi Germans – dilemmas without any solutions or good ways out [...]”³⁵ The problem of co-responsibility, which we have inherited from our ancestors, is an interesting counterbalance to the above-mentioned fashion for Jewishness, which does not touch on the topic of misdeeds committed by Polish people during the Shoah. The accusations of the shared guilt is one of the obstacles to discussing the Holocaust openly in Poland.³⁶ Thus, besides the fashion for Jewish culture, there is a taboo area, “[...] and the reason for spreading the knowledge of the Holocaust is the intention to avoid the need to acknowledge the (co-)responsibility of certain Poles and the unwillingness to lose the status of a nation particularly hurt by fate [...]”³⁷

The problem of the Holocaust is raised by young writers of Jewish descent, often emphasizing Polish guilt, who – contrary to the former generations of authors – have not experienced the Shoah, but feel its consequences even today.

The starting point for such texts is the post-memory situation of an individual who is one or two generations away from the historical trauma, and for whom the memory of the past, deprived of the access to what actually happened, is mediated through someone else’s story (family history), a photograph or another artefact. Still, the past accessed in such an indirect way (seemingly so distant and belonging only in the archives of our culture) elicits deep involvement of such an individual due to the projectional creation of the missing parts of the story, based on the signs found, excerpts of the stories and surviving material relics. Consequently, the experience gained in a post-memory dimension has a unique modality of influence, just like a delayed and recollected power of a traumatic event [...].³⁸

Autobiographical narratives become more and more frequent on the Polish book market, including many titles by Polish women writers of Jewish

in the Holocaust. Although this view is criticized by Małgorzata Domagalska, she herself describes the behaviour of anti-Semitic publicists who, when confronted with the Shoah, rose above hatred and went as far as to risk their own lives to save Jews. Especially significant is the case of Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, who spoke for helping Jews despite her anti-Semitism, or, partially, because of it.” See: W. Mich, “Wokół (nie)pamięci Zagłady,” in: *Pamięć Shoah. Kulturowe reprezentacje i praktyki upamiętnienia...*, p. 379.

³⁵ Z. Bauman, “Świat nawiedzony,” in: *Zagłada. Współczesne problemy...*, p. 23.

³⁶ The very definition of Holocaust literature may be problematic, since – as Dorota Krawczyńska claims – “[...] distinguishing Holocaust literature in a wide sense (from all the other types of texts) encounters enormous difficulties, ranging from the attempts to delineate its time limits, to the need to classify it using some clear criteria (e.g. of the genre).” See: D. Krawczyńska, “Literaturoznawstwo wobec piśmiennictwa o Zagładzie,” in: *Zagłada. Współczesne problemy...*, p. 131.

³⁷ W. Mich, *Wokół (nie)pamięci Zagłady...*, p. 378. This issue is approached in an interesting way by Jacek Bocheński, who published (in *Gazeta Wyborcza*) an ironic list of “anti-Semitic crimes committed by Poles” during the war, which contribute to Polish unwillingness to learn the truth about the Holocaust. See: J. Bocheński, “Stanąc po obu stronach,” *Gazeta Wyborcza* (30 Dec. 2006 – 1 Jan. 2007), pp. 19–20.

³⁸ B. Dąbrowski, “Postpamięć, zależność, trauma,” in: *Kultura po przejściach, osoby z przeszłością...*, pp. 256–257.

descent. So far, it has been believed that history should be told only from a male perspective. Female prose has been on the periphery of Great Literature³⁹ cultivated by males. As mentioned previously, female literature evokes pejorative associations and its achievements are belittled and shown in contrast to male literature. This is the case of the prose on the Holocaust, as indicated by the fact that:

the issue of the female experience of the Shoah has only recently (since the beginning of the 1980s) become of interest to the world's literature historians; in Poland, it has never seen any systematic monographic presentation showing the memories of Polish Jewish female authors as a consistent phenomenon, which constitutes a separate area within the field of autobiographical writings from the times of the war.⁴⁰

Moreover, the issues of the Shoah are still being looked at from a male viewpoint, and the majority of the critical texts on the subject have been written based on masculine autobiographical experience, as in *Czarne sezony* [Black seasons] by Michał Głowiński, *Tworci* by Marek Bieńczyk and *Golden Harvest* by Jan Tomasz Gross.⁴¹ A conclusion might be that:

The story about the Polish fate has had its [stereotypical] male and female versions. A man fights and suffers (or dies) for the lost cause, to be remembered as a hero by posterity. A woman gives birth to future warriors, bears the hardships of life with dignity, protects Polish hearth and home and cherishes the tradition perpetuating Polish fate.⁴²

Yet, it must be noted that it is female autobiographies that are the most terrifying and authentic confessions, devoid of any pathos about the trauma inherited from the mother – as the mother is the most prominent character in the Holocaust narratives written by women.⁴³

In contrast with the books written by men, women writers focus on emotions and an almost physical sensation of the legacy left in their hearts and minds by the trauma experienced by their loved ones. Although both men and women confess in their *quasi*-autobiographical texts that they learnt about their Jewish origin in their late childhood, or, most frequently, adulthood,⁴⁴ the way show their stories are created are extremely different.

³⁹ Here, reference is made to the title of the book by Arleta Galant, who argues that female prose is on the periphery of Polish literature. See: A. Galant, *Prowincje polskiej literatury. Polska proza kobiet po 1956 roku*, Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2013.

⁴⁰ A. Ubertowska, "Pisałam sercem i krwią." Poetyka kobiecych autobiografii holokautowych," *Ruch Literacki* 2008 (6), p. 617.

⁴¹ So far, Holocaust literature has had patriarchal features, as only from that perspective "the story of Polish fate [was] seen as natural, obvious." See: H. Gosk, "(Nie)obecność opowieści o wstydzie w narracji losu polskiego," in: *Kultura po przejściach, osoby z przeszłościq...*, p. 82.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ See the prose by Ewa Kuryluk, Magdalena Tulli or Agata Tuszyńska.

⁴⁴ However, as argued by Justyna Kowalska-Leder, the Holocaust memories written from the perspective of a child became popular in Polish literature after the year 2000, such as *Dziewczynka w czerwonym płaszczku* by Roma Ligocka, *Byłam wtedy dzieckiem* by Ilona Flutyszajn-Gruda, *Moje drogi dzieciństwa 1939-1945* by Marian Domański, or *Nigdy nie zapomnij klamać!* by Felicja Bryn. This list may be expanded by *Dziewczynka w zielo-*

Male authors often resort to fictitious plots with an extensive Jewish motif. Equally often, their novels “have accusatory intentions towards Poles as ‘the witnesses that were too passive’, co-participants or beneficiaries of the Holocaust,⁴⁵ as in *Sąsiedzi* by Tomasz Gross, or “the theoretical discourse is hidden under a layer of dense, unclucid narration⁴⁶ (as in *Tworci* by Marek Bieńczyk). Male authors repeatedly reject certain forms of talking about the Shoah, as exemplified by *Kamień graniczny* by Piotr Matywiecki, where the author “often uses situational clichés, derived from the classic volumes of the Holocaust memories by Elie Wiesel, Bogdan Wojdowski or Primo Levi.⁴⁷ *Czarne sezony* by Michał Głowiński show the characteristic features of male writing too. Although he strongly emphasizes the autobiographical motifs in his novel, the author brings “a philological superego, [which] manifests itself on various levels of the text⁴⁸ to the foreground. Such an oblique treatment of Jewish themes is one of the most typical attributes of male prose. This approach is also evident in *Umschlagplatz* by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, where “the space of the Shoah [...] exists [...] in a relocated form – as a secret layer in the archaeological cross-section of the town’s history. The narrator compares travelling around Warsaw to travelling through ‘double and triple time,’ through its various dimensions,⁴⁹ thus adopting the unique attitude of a witness.

Women, in turn, describe the Holocaust openly, inscribing it into their own intimate experience. Such a way of depicting the Shoah is compatible with the characteristics underlying female writing in general. As emphasized by Grażyna Borkowska, there are three emotional areas of female literature, i.e. strangeness, otherness and “confusion of what is one’s own and someone else’s, what is new and old, known and unknown, authentic and imitated, natural and cultural, determined and subject to free choice.⁵⁰ Usually, female written prose “is [then] an autobiographical saga in character, breaking definitely off with the sense of a genealogical continuity, wandering around the facts and speculations, pledging to chase the truth following nobody’s track and getting lost in the void, which brings only substitute memory back.⁵¹ Female prose is as alienated and sentenced to criticism as the very concept

nym sweterku by Krystyna Chiger and Daniel Paisner, the publication of which (in 2011) moved Polish society deeply. See: J. Kowalska-Leder, *Doświadczenie Zagłady z perspektywy dziecka w polskiej literaturze dokumentu osobistego*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2009, pp. 220–221.

⁴⁵ P. Czaplinski, “Prześladowcy, pomocnicy, świadkowie. Zagłada i polska literatura późnej nowoczesności,” in: *Zagłada. Współczesne problemy...*, p. 172.

⁴⁶ A. Ubortowska, *Świadectwo – trama – głos. Literackie reprezentacje Holocaustu*, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2007, p. 272.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁵⁰ G. Borkowska, “Wyskrobać starą zaprawę z pomnika polskiej literatury...,” p. 59.

⁵¹ M. Cuber, “Od stosowności do dosadności. Wokół przemiany polskojęzycznej prozy o Zagładzie w latach 1989-2009,” in: *Nowe dwudziestolecie (1989-2009). Rozpoznania, hierarchie, perspektywy*, edited by H. Gosk. Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2010, p. 205.

of the Holocaust. Both the issue of the Shoah and female prose are pigeonholed and labelled as shameful. Although female wartime experience has been presented only marginally so far, Aleksandra Ubertowska stresses that "female 'gender-specific themes' have been distinguished [...], [which comprise] maternity in a ghetto, fertility, sexual violence, the threat of sterilization, 'the crime' of (female ghetto inmates) getting pregnant, female communities in ghettos and concentration camps."⁵²

Given how popular the subject of the autobiographical confession of women (in the second or, more and more often, third generation after the Shoah) has become, the definition of female Holocaust literature should be extended also with the experience of the people who have inherited the trauma of World War II, as it were, with the whole heritage of the nationality. Another characteristic of this literature is its avoidance of creating national myths, which often emerge in male prose. "Enslavement – which was our fate throughout the past two centuries, except for the two decades between the world wars – favours the emergence of defensive attitudes in Polish culture, including the idealization of one's own image [...],"⁵³ which is still cultivated by male authors. Women writers, in turn, refer to their own experience, often in a brutal way, devoid of pathos, depicting the situation of an individual against the background of the Polish and Jewish nations.

Magdalena Górecka writes:

In the maze of historical sources, subjective testimonies, opinions formulated *ex post*, as well as legends and myths formed throughout decades, it is impossible to present the events in a way which is not open to doubts. The knowledge of the past repeatedly proves to be vicarious, only representational in character, which is subject to limitations and encumbered with ideological and cultural influences.⁵⁴

A female perspective on the Holocaust seems to overcome the tendencies described by Górecka through the self-thematic and autobiographical character of such writings. Primo Levi stresses that "The sense of unreality is continually present in Holocaust literature. Today, even today, while sitting at the table and writing, I am not quite sure that these things actually happened."⁵⁵ One should not agree with him in view of female literature, where female writers-heroines cope with today's reality perfectly well, and simultaneously refer to the times when they grew up in the shadow of the Shoah. Contemporary women writers are aware of the brand with which they have to live, and describe – in a specific way – what male authors find difficult to

⁵² A. Ubertowska, "Pisałam sercem i krwią...", p. 617.

⁵³ M. Czermińska, "O dwuznaczności sytuacji ofiary," in: *Kultura po przejściach, osoby z przeszłości...*, p. 92.

⁵⁴ M. Górecka, "'Stygmat temporalnej dyslokacji.' Eksperymenty z czasem jako postmodernistyczna kontestacja tradycyjnych reprezentacji historii w prozie po 1989 roku," in: *Sekundy i epoki. Czas w literaturze polskiej po 1989 roku*, edited by Z. Nalewajk, M. Mips, Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2013, p. 283.

⁵⁵ Quoted after: A.H. Rosenfeld, *Podwójna śmierć. Rozważania o literaturze Holocaustu*, translated by B. Krawcowicz, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo "Cyklady," 2003, p. 43.

share. This is largely influenced by the already mentioned autobiographical character of female Holocaust writing, since (as German Ritz says):

autobiographical literature, established in the 19th and 20th centuries, has become the main forum of female writing, where autobiographical 'I' has, for a long time, been the only and preferred means of reaching one's own 'I'.⁵⁶

Women try to tame what male writers of Jewish origin have not been able to overcome, through "the decision to make memories public, the intentional moment of crossing the border between the boudoir (and the institution of a memoir written for private use) and public discourse, between the 'subculture' of female writing and the mainstream of war testimonies."⁵⁷ In *Włoskie szpilki* by Magdalena Tulli, *Rodzinna historia lęku* by Agata Tuszyńska, *Frascati* and *Goldi* by Ewa Kuryluk, as well as *Dziewczynka w czerwonym płaszczku* by Roma Ligocka, elements common to female Holocaust writings may be distinguished, though each of these confessions is different in character.

One of the several characteristics of this fiction is its construal of time, which becomes "a function of the subjective feelings of female authors, their separate vision of the world, which seems to be manifest in the lack (or fragmentary presence) of chronological notes, which might organize the timeline according to intersubjective criteria,"⁵⁸ and "a manifestation of making the discourse private [...] [through] the specific way of constructing the text, [which] assumes the form of 'weaving' the story from indirect gossip, other people's relations and retrospections,"⁵⁹ or "the absence of a historical or historiographical reflection, [which] is counterbalanced with [...] the representations that should be called 'female topicality'."⁶⁰

All these features are manifest in the texts by contemporary women writers of Jewish origin, for whom autobiographical motifs are only an excuse for making "truly polyphonic statements,"⁶¹ in which they show their traumatic experience against the background of the whole Jewish community or their family. Such a comprehensive approach, depicting an individual against the background of the whole community, confirms Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg's thesis that:

individuals are never 'really alone', so they construct their autobiographical memories in mutually influential relations, while other people's memories are born in the same way. Ultimately, individual and collective or social memories constitute a seamless cobweb [...].⁶²

⁵⁶ G. Ritz, "Gatunek literacki a 'gender.' Zarys problematyki," in: *Genologia dzisiaj*, edited by W. Bolecki, I. Opacki, Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2000, p. 49.

⁵⁷ A. Ubertowska, "Pisałam sercem i krwią...", p. 621.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 624.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 625.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 624.

⁶² A. Milchman, A. Rosenberg, *Eksperymenty w myśleniu o Holocauście. Auschwitz, nowoczesności i filozofia*, translated by L. Krowiecki, J. Szacki, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo "Scholar," 2003, p. 132. "The choice of a non-egocentric, non-confessional perspective, the conspicuous focus on 'someone else's suffering,' the fate of other people surrounding the women authors of Holocaust memories" is exemplified by the heroine of *Włoskie szpilki* by

Nevertheless, although female written books on the Holocaust emphasize the role of the Jewish family or community, the most important feature of this type of fiction – as opposed to male-written prose – is “a strong emotional streak coming to the fore in the stylistic layer,”⁶³ as well as sensitivity. It should be also emphasized that two independent poles have emerged in female writing. One is focused on authors who learnt about their Jewish origin as adult women, and committed the resulting emotions to paper. The other is concerned with women writers who have always known their ancestry, but who led their lives outside the mainstream.⁶⁴

All these characteristics, coupled with a growing number of texts about the Holocaust written from women’s perspective, determine the huge potential of this (still underestimated) type of writing. In Ubertowska’s words, “[...] ‘reclaiming history’, with women entering the formerly off-limits zone of historical writing, occurs, as it were, naturally, but – unlike previously – women enter there in the capacity of doers, active participants, rather than supporting characters [...].”⁶⁵

The first two-generation autobiography (excluding Eva Hoffman’s book *Lost in Translation*, published in London in 1995) was written by Agata Tuszyńska in 2005. As Tomasz Łysak writes, “a distinctive feature [of that book] is the lack of knowledge about the past caused by the secrecy surrounding both the Jewish origins of the mother’s family and the family’s wartime experience.” Tuszyńska’s volume is about the issue of “sudden Jewishness” [...], which denotes “the identity built on the discovery made as an adult person.”⁶⁶

Agata Tuszyńska is the first woman who has dared to share such a frank confession and record her experience as a second-generation Jewish person. Since the year 2000, there have been more and more such confessions in Polish prose, very different in terms of the genre, but always founded on prominent autobiographical motifs. It is due to women that “the language strategies [...] [which were previously considered] inadequate to express the messages deemed absolutely unique”⁶⁷ have become enriched with memoir

Magdalena Tulli, who – describing her trauma of being a Jewish child – focuses mainly on the feelings of her mother, a former inmate of the Nazi German camp in Auschwitz. The same is done by Ewa Kuryluk, who – in *Frascati* and *Goldi* – refers repeatedly to her mother’s and brother’s emotions, but hides her own. A similar method is used by Agata Tuszyńska in *Rodzinną historią lęku*, where her thinking relates mostly to the fate of her mother and her mother’s family. See: A. Ubertowska, “Kobiece ‘strategie przetrwania’ w piśmiennictwie o Holokauście (z perspektywy literaturoznawcy),” in: *Ślady obecności...*, p. 323.

⁶³ A. Ubertowska, “Pisałam sercem i krwią...,” p. 628.

⁶⁴ See the prose by Mary Berg, Irena Birnbaum, Halina Birenbaum, Janina Brandwajn-Ziemian, Nachema Tec, Halina Zawadzka, Janina Bauman, Ita Dimant, Anna Langfus, Noemi Szac-Wajnkranc, Maria Szelestwoska or Leokadia Szmidt, who “exist predominantly in a private space, being adolescents daughters of usually well-off businessmen, lawyers, doctors, or else young wives and mothers.” *Ibid.*, p. 623.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 621.

⁶⁶ M. Cuber, *Metonimie Zagłady. O polskie prozie lat 1987–2012*, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2013, pp. 13–14.

⁶⁷ A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Holocaust...*, p. 11.

contexts, which has endowed literary depictions of the experience of the Holocaust and the post-war individual trauma with a personal, strongly appealing form. The new quality introduced to Holocaust literature by women derives mainly from the strategy of “a belated confession,”⁶⁸ which female writers make only after many years of grappling with the weight of the trauma rooted in them because of being Jewish.

It is trauma that is one of the major categories associated with the texts about the Shoah. Both “the aging Holocaust children”⁶⁹ and the young-generation writers grapple with this category throughout their lives, and their books overflow with it, since “human ways of coping with oppressive, deprecating, traumatic experience are a universal problem, though it assumes different forms and gains varied importance in every culture,”⁷⁰ as Ryszard Nycz writes. In Polish culture, marked with war atrocities, this problem has assumed the form of a post-Holocaust trauma.

The issue of inheriting trauma [...] [has great significance in Polish society, which results in] the more and more frequently heard [...] voices of the artists born after the war, who were not victims of the Shoah, but in whose literary or artistic output the echo of this experience is heard nevertheless, and their parents’ trauma has interfered in their lives since the youngest age.⁷¹

A trauma taken over from the ancestors is a motif characteristic of female Holocaust prose. This motif makes Polish fiction about the Shoah a part of the collection of post-traumatic texts and trauma studies.⁷² The issue of inherited trauma is one of the most dramatic legacies of our time, connected inseparably with the experience of the Shoah. In this interpretative context, Anna Mach suggests that there is a form of:

post-traumatism “without trauma” – one that makes the whole culture suffer “in place of” the entities actually hurt; it would be a phenomenon symptomatic of the situation when the actual victims were not given back what was their due. Seen from this perspective, a debt owed to the past is probably one that is impossible to repay [...].⁷³

Typical of Polish Holocaust prose written by women is its specific construal of memory, which becomes a sort of curse that does not let you forget

⁶⁸ The term taken from an article by Przemysław Czapliński: “Zagłada – niedokończona narracja polskiej nowoczesności,” in: *Ślady obecności...*, p. 359.

⁶⁹ Irit Amiel’s term, quoted after Marta Cuber. See M. Cuber, “Od stosowności do dosadności...” p. 201.

⁷⁰ R. Nycz, “Wprowadzenie. ‘Nie leczony, chroniczny pogłos.’ Trzy uwagi o polskim dyskursie postzależnościowym,” in: *Kultura po przejściach, osoby z przeszłością...*, p. 7.

⁷¹ A. Szczepan, “Polski dyskurs posttraumatyczny...,” p. 241.

⁷² I approach post-traumatic texts as defined by Anna Mach, who believes that “in particular, the works (usually created by young, 20-40-year old artists) which make more or less direct references – in the way allowing for a formal experiment – to the issues of the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations during World War II may be the symptoms of this phenomenon or the manifestations of a post-traumatic condition.” I use this term also to include the texts which address Polish-Jewish relations and the Holocaust after World War II too. See: A. Mach, “Polska kondycja posttraumatyczna – próba diagnozy,” in: *Kultura po przejściach, osoby z przeszłością...*, pp. 217, 221.

⁷³ Ibidem, p. 223.

about the 20th century nightmare, which – in the form of trauma – enters the 21st century, together with the new generations. The “survivor syndrome” is inherited, as consecutive generations pass on the poisoned fruit of fading martyrdom to posterity. Descendants of the victims cherish nothing but a common legend of the categorial inherited martyrdom, having had no experience of what those stories refer to,⁷⁴ but still keeping them in memory.

Due to women writers, the Holocaust experience has gained a new wider context, which is becoming more prominent in Polish literature, as opposed to male written stories of the Shoah. To both women and men, Holocaust fiction is a challenge in the contemporary world, in which the fashion for being Jewish is intertwined with the unsaid traumas of the post-traumatic generations.

This new character of historical reality, together with its entire traumatic load, calls not only for artists and writers but also scholars and academics to attune their tools, to develop such artistic forms which may take up the challenge of matching the obscure – and not always possible to comprehend – meanings with the forms of those events. Describing and explaining those events with the use of traditional narrative conventions, i.e. through direct recording (registering the facts) or “copying” is bound to end up in failure and/or falsehood or inauthenticity. On the one hand, those events elude objective observation, so they cannot constitute an object of knowledge (thus, the relation between seeing and knowing is upset). On the other hand, they are observed from numerous, often mutually incompatible perspectives. Our idea of what makes a realistic depiction should be subject to revision, so that our experience, which is unique to our times and characteristic of our historical experience, may be taken into consideration, as well as the difficult relations between the daily and the unusual, between normal and exceptional situations.⁷⁵

Since the year 2000, Polish writers of Jewish origin have been proving that the reality in which we live is a map with uncharted territories which are coming to light slowly, “eluding objective observation” and being approached from many angles. In this situation, Przemysław Czapliński’s words on the prose in the 1990s are perfectly applicable also to Polish literature on the Holocaust in recent years:

The phenomenon of the differentiation of the Shoah seems to me a central category in the literature of the 1990s. What I mean is the domination of the strategy of talking about the Holocaust individually, not consensually. This strategy leads to searching for a strictly individual perspective on one’s participation in history. A particular person (a Jew, Pole, woman, child, old man, etc.) describes a particular experience, particular places, events and people, looking for one’s own style, narration or composition. Because of this – and not before – the Shoah regains its differences. Again, it becomes the time of the difference between “Jews and humans”, it regains its incomprehensibility, retaining its bestial simplicity – and conversely: the literature of the 1990s restores the unfathomable obviousness to the Shoah, namely its view from the Aryan side, with rare surprise and easy indifference.⁷⁶

Translated by Piotr Cymbalista

⁷⁴ Z. Bauman, “Świat nawiedzony...,” p. 16.

⁷⁵ K. Bojarska, “Czas na realizm – (post)traumatyczny,” *Teksty Drugie* 2012, (4). <http://tekstydrugie.pl/pl/news/item/id,29,title,2012--nr-4-Realizm-posttraumatyczny.html> [accessed on: 30.11.2014].

⁷⁶ P. Czapliński, “Ślady obecności. Zagłada – niedokończona narracja polskiej nowoczesności,” in: *Ślady obecności...*, p. 357.

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