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Women's hair in Lager narratives

Can you feel that moment of cutting a woman's hair? That "placing on the throne" of Jewish brides before their black wedding! The Devil himself held black candles in that ceremony! The glare of their light froze in the dead-green eyes of that "barber". I read in Stefan Zweig's monograph how in the morning, before she was escorted from her cell to the scaffold, Marie Antoinette's hair was cut. Somewhere else I read about those sentenced to death, whose hair turned grey in an instant when the executioner's scissors came close to their neck when cutting their hair before the execution. In Treblinka and other places there were hundreds, thousands of Marie Antoinettes. All the way from age six, from their first braids.¹

The hair of the internees at concentration and death camps was managed by the SS, and the Main Economic and Administrative Office of the Third Reich. The chapter "Utylizacja zwłok ofiar" [Disposal of corpses] (section "Wykorzystanie włosów ofiar" [Utilisation of the victims' hair]) in the second volume of the fundamental study entitled *Auschwitz 1940–1945. Węzłowe zagadnienia z dziejów obozu*,² includes historical details regarding the hair shaved off the heads of the prisoners interned at the camp, and the hair of Jewish women, victims of direct extermination. The study discussed the hygienic and preventive (hindering escape efforts)³ reasons for shaving the hair of prisoners, and the utilisation of the hair of the victims as an industrial resource.⁴

A few basic facts need to be reiterated. In August 1942, WVHA (the Main Economic and Administrative Office) issued an ordinance to the Auschwitz headquarters, and to other camps regarding periodic collection of cut hair measuring at

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¹ R. Auerbach, "Treblinka. Reportaż", M. Polit (ed.), trans. K. Szymaniak, *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 2013, vol. 8, p. 56. [English version translated from Polish]

² *Auschwitz 1940–1945. Węzłowe zagadnienia z dziejów obozu*, W. Długoborski, F. Piper (eds.), Wydawnictwo Państwowego Muzeum Oświęcim, Oświęcim-Brzezinka 1995, vol. 2.

³ Wiesław Kielar thus reported on the preparations for an escape from Auschwitz in the summer of 1944: "We stopped shaving our hair. It wasn't particularly striking as many old prisoners had already been permitted to have long hair. Only Kazek Gosk was suspicious about our lengthening crew cuts, but he said nothing", W. Kielar, *Anus mundi*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Krakow 1980, p. 322. [English version translated from Polish]

⁴ *Auschwitz 1940–1945*, pp. 299–300.

least 2 cm in length. There were also plans to create a branch of the industry for processing hair locally, but in January 1943 the commandants of 11 camps were ordered to offer the material, priced at 50 Pfennigs for 1 kg of hair, to external industrial companies. As early as in 1942, over 160 kg of hair were collected in Majdanek, while between February 1943 and March 1944 the camp sold 730 kg of hair. There is no corresponding data from Auschwitz, but after it was liberated, the allied forces found there approx. 7,000 kg of hair of approx. 140,000 people exterminated.⁵

The historical factography discussed above did not consider hair as human remains. The issue is raised in reflections of a museum nature, associated with the preservation and exhibition of the hair of the victims, and the important ethical dimension of that relic.⁶

What interests me in this article are the issues associated with hair which have been presented mainly in women's Lager narratives, though I shall also refer to men's narratives, and to experiences from DP camps, Stalags and Oflags, and to the death camp. I have selected the female authors based on the criterion of their personal camp experiences. It turned out that among all the dramatic experiences endured by Lager internees, women's recollections very often focus on those associated with the body. Among those, the most distinct are those associated with hair. Evidently enough, the recorded experiences associated with hair are deeper, more intense, and acute. They remain just on the borderline of intimacy, or actually within that area. Each of them is associated with a different image of the camp, and a different story. Therefore, they may constitute a type of interpretative category, which reveals the layers of camp existence. In this text, I shall offer only a partial study of those, and present only a selection of the possible experiences. I am not searching for metaphors or generalising figures in them; I am rather trying to grasp the extent of the experiences, and in it the individual voices of memories.

Hair as industrial material was collected not only from the bodies of gassed victims. Michał Piotrowski, an internee of a concentration camp, several years after leaving it thus remembered one Sunday's cutting of the hair in the men's sector of Ravensbrück (the described situation might have taken place in 1942):

The shaving of the hair began. [...] The barber cut a line from the forehead to the back of the head using a blunt trimmer, and politely said that's all. [...] Soon our faces fell when we learned that every few weeks we will be shaved in a similar way. Apparently there is a ban on wasting this resource, as it was useful for upholstery works, which was why the internees were to be shaved less often, while the hair was to be collected into special bags. Longer hair, however, could help internees escape, so camp commandant Suhren ordered a line to be shaved along the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Interesting material for a debate on the subject was offered by Marta Zawodna in an article entitled "Wokół tego, co pozostało. Biograficzne podejście do badań nad szczątkami ludzkimi na przykładzie włosów eksponowanych w Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau", *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 2007, issue 2.

internees' heads every two weeks. Complete head shaving was to be done every few months. The line on our heads became known as *Suhrenstrasse* (Suhren's street).⁷

Internees at other camps called the line of cut or shaved hair over their heads as "Lagerstrasse for lice" or "a path for lice".⁸

But the same treatment was applied to women as well. That was recalled by Maria Puretz, a Jewish woman, in a post-WWII account of her internment in Gundelsdorf, a subcamp of Flossenbürg, in September 1944: "For stealing a few potatoes you were not only beaten but they also shaved a line across your head".⁹ The Semitism of the narrator, and the time of the events indicate that whole heads were not shaved, assuming future utilisation of the hair as a material to be collected from corpses.

Not in every camp from the beginning of its operation, and not all newly arrived internees had their heads shaved, especially if it occurred before WWII. Wolfgang Sofsky thus discussed the first days at Dachau (March 1933): "There is no uniform internee clothing. Everything is done properly, without shouting or harassment. No one comes up with the idea to shave the hair of the newly arrived".¹⁰ The lack of the procedure could, also during WWII, mean an early phase of establishing a camp. Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk thus reflected on the circumstances of the arrival of "female prisoners from Pawiak" at KL Lublin: "In January 1943, the Germans were not ready to receive female political prisoners. We were led into the camp without the rigour applied at other locations: preliminary bath, tattoo, striped uniform, hair shaving. It was thanks to that that we avoided the mental petrification".¹¹ According

⁷ M. Piotrowski, *Nie tylko w Ravensbruck. ...1723 dni za drutami KL Auschwitz, Neuengamme, Ravensbrück, Berlin-Lichterfelde*, Prószyński i S-ka, Warsaw 1991, pp. 72–73. [English version translated from Polish]

⁸ Stanisław Grzesiuk thus reported on it: "We were allowed to grow longer hair. They did not shave our heads using a razor every week. They shaved our heads every three months, while every week they shaved only a four-centimetre wide path running from the forehead, over the top, and to the back of our heads. So that everyone was marked in case they tried to escape. «The authorities» got narrow two-centimetre paths, while we got shaved wide strips like roads. We called those strips «a street for lice». The Germans needed the hair for something. When they shaved us every three months, they took our hair into a box, and each block gave an SS man everything it collected", S. Grzesiuk, *Pięć lat kacetu*, Książka i Wiedza, Warsaw 1985, p. 261. [English version translated from Polish] A portrait of a thus shaved internee can be found, e.g. in an album developed by J. Jaworska, *Nie wszystkich umrę... Twórczość plastyczna Polaków w hitlerowskich więzieniach i obozach koncentracyjnych 1939–1945*, Książka i Wiedza, Warsaw 1975. It is a pencil drawing by Kazimierz Stachiewicz entitled *Portret więźnia* created in Gusen in 1943 (drawing 413).

⁹ *Dokumenty zbrodni i męczeństwa*, M. Borwicz, N. Rost, J. Wulf (eds.), Centralny Komitet Żydów Polskich, Wojewódzka Żydowska Komisja Historyczna w Krakowie, Krakow 1945, p. 55. [English version translated from Polish]

¹⁰ W. Sofsky, *Ustrój terroru. Obóz koncentracyjny*, trans. M. Łukasiewicz, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny im. Emanuela Ringelbluma, Warsaw 2016, p. 9. [English version translated from Polish]

¹¹ D. Brzosko-Mędryk, *Matylda*, Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, Warsaw 1970, p. 26.

to the author of *Matylda*, the provisional stage, which actually never ended at Majdanek, consisting of incomplete organisation, and exceptionally primitive conditions, enabled internees to avoid the shock caused by the instrumental “rite of admission”. Yet the lack of head shaving could also mean the insufficient resources of the barbers in the face of the volume of work associated with the inflow of Jewish transports. In an historical study edited by Tadeusz Mencel, one could read that “female internees were not shaved at Majdanek like at other camps”.¹² It is hard to say whether that applied to internees of all nationalities, or only women of non-Jewish descent. In fact, according to Andrzej Strzelecki, in July 1943 the Main Economic and Administrative Office of the Reich confirmed the collection of 3,000 kg of women’s hair from the Auschwitz and Majdanek camps.¹³

In the case of female Lager internees, the procedures at the first women’s concentration camp, i.e. Lichtenburg (operating from 1937), and KL Ravensbrück (from 1939), were of key importance. The latter was a model camp, and its statute practices of conduct towards the internees and some of the personnel were transferred to the majority of later women’s subcamps, e.g. Birkenau or the women’s fields in KL Lublin. In the camps located in the Reich before WWII, and later in the conquered Europe, terror of extreme proportions was used mainly against men. The percentage of female internees in 1938 was 3.3%, and it increased rapidly to 11.7% in 1939.¹⁴ Yet one could conclude that until 1942 women remained on the fringes of the concentration camp world, and their fate in the camps differed from men’s experiences. Neither in the central penal facility for women in Moringen, nor in Lichtenburg, were women’s heads shaved, and they retained their private clothing. The first execution of a woman was held in Ravensbrück probably in 1941, while in the men’s sector of the camp within just one month there died as many men as, proportionally, in the women’s camp within a period of two years.¹⁵ As the numbers of women interned at the camps increased, so did the severity of the restrictions against them.

The local SS established a particularly degrading ritual on arrival, where women had to undress, shower, and endure a bodily [gynaecological – note B. Cz.] examination; many were also shaved. Any “feeble attempts at modesty had to be abandoned”, Buber Nuemann wrote. These assaults on women’s bodies and their gender identities [...] had not been common before the war.¹⁶

¹² Z. Morawska, “Warunki egzystencji więźniów”, in: *Majdanek 1941–1944*, T. Mencel (ed.), Wydawnictwo Lubelskie, Lublin 1999, p. 137. [English version translated from Polish]

¹³ A. Strzelecki, “Wykorzystanie zwłok ofiar obozu”, *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie* 1995, issue 21, p. 101.

¹⁴ N. Wachsmann, *Historia nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych*, trans. M. Antosiewicz, Świat Książki, Warsaw 2016, p. 154. [English version: Wachsmann Nikolaus. *KL. A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*. New York 2015]

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

The severity of the initial procedures basically depended on the local SS team, and were executed differently in relation to different transports and different women. That was described in the recollections of Maria Rutkowska-Kurcyszowa from Ravensbrück: "My hair avoided the razor. I think it was not so much thanks to its cleanness as much as pure accident. They shaved the head of every second woman".¹⁷ Anna Truszkowska-Kulniczowa's account of arriving at the camp offered a somewhat different state of things: "They shaved the heads of most the internees. I was among the few whom they had left with hair".¹⁸ Austrian researchers indicated that in Ravensbrück all Russian women were shaved, but only some French and Austrian women were subjected to the procedure.¹⁹ Urszula Wińska remembered that special treatment was sometimes applied to Polish Sondertransports "E.g. in 1941, a special transport from Krakow and its suburbs received an additional reception, and every tenth head was shaved, allegedly for hygienic reasons. They all spent three days in a bunker lying in the cells on a stone floor. It was called delousing".²⁰ In Ravensbrück (and other camps) head shaving also applied to the mentally ill,²¹ newcomers, and those suffering from typhus.²²

At the women's camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, according to Amesberger, Auer, and Halbmayr, only Jewish women were shaved to the skin.²³ Officially, it was done for hygienic reasons, but it was, of course, justified with other reasons: the intention was to humiliate and separate them from the rest of the camp community. Then, in a study entitled *Więźniarki w obozie hitlerowskim w Oświęcimiu-Brzezince*, Lechosław Cebo stated that only those Aryan women whose hair was unkempt were shaved to the skin. "In most cases, they shaved haired places throughout the body, disinfecting them later by wiping them with one and the same dirty cloth soaked in disinfectant. Those activities were usually done by Jewish female internees from Slovakia in the presence of SS men. Yet it was not uncommon for the task to be performed by men".²⁴

It should be indicated at this point how pointless some of those procedures were, and that there was no consistent rule regarding the decision about applying

¹⁷ M. Rutkowska-Kurcyszowa, *Kamyki Dawida. Wspomnienia*, Unia, Katowice 2005, p. 147. [English version translated from Polish]

¹⁸ A. Truszkowska-Kulniczowa, *Mój XX wiek. Wspomnienia*, Kampol, Szczecin 2004, p. 70. [English version translated from Polish]

¹⁹ H. Amesberger, K. Auer, B. Halbmayr, *Sexualisierte Gewalt. Weibliche Erfahrungen in NS-Konzentrationslagern*, Mandelbaum, Vienna 2004, p. 80.

²⁰ Wińska's account was quoted by Wanda Kiedrzyńska in a monographic study devoted to the women's camp in Ravensbrück. W. Kiedrzyńska, *Ravensbrück – kobiety obóz koncentracyjny*, Książka i Wiedza, Warsaw 1961, p. 97. [English version translated from Polish]

²¹ W. Kiedrzyńska, *Ravensbrück...*, p. 108.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²³ H. Amesberger, K. Auer, B. Halbmayr, *Sexualisierte Gewalt...*, p. 80.

²⁴ L. Cebo, *Więźniarki w obozie hitlerowskim w Oświęcimiu-Brzezince*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 1984, p. 18.

them, something repeated in many other situations. Yet the word *pointless* may not be the best choice, as those disinfection activities had an indubitable aim, i.e. to humiliate the internees yet again all the more severe as it was because associated with the intimate aspect of corporeality, and, at the same time, stigmatising in a striking way; I shall return to the issue further on in the article. Sometimes, that was accompanied with an additional amount of deviousness. “They mainly destroyed the hair of those women, who had it kept the best”,²⁵ reported former Auschwitz internee Elżbieta Sobczyńska.

Male internees reacted differently to the shaving of their bodies. In general, men coped with it better. Yet even in women’s narratives, one can find various reactions. And tragedy is not always their dominant characteristic. Maria Elżbieta Jezierska, based on the recollections of Halina Fronczak, developed an account of the first transport of female prisoners of the Serb Pawiak, sent to Birkenau:²⁶

Now a particularly unpleasant moment. It turns out that all without exception are to be shaved to the skin. Regardless of whether they have lice or not. To no avail the beautiful Fiodorowicz with her long locks struggles – she is the first to leave the scissors with a disgusting bare skull. Suddenly: a loud restless bout of laughter. Only Fiodorowicz cries: the tears of humiliation and women’s vanity. And now look, another one! Grzesiowska looks just like a man. Infectious hysterical laughter – up to tears with laughter. How can one not laugh at shaved heads! This one has a pumpkin-shaped head, that one – a child’s head, and that one looks like a respectable parish priest. Zugangs are laughing. Look at those gradations from the blunt scissors! How can you not laugh at the naked, white, completely shaved bodies emerging from behind the curtain, with darker faces, and fingernails painted so meaninglessly and liberally with red nail polish as if with blood!²⁷

It would be, of course, difficult to assess today the amount of terror-induced hysteria in that “joyfulness”. The following is a description of Auschwitz nearly a year later, in May 1943, in an account by Irena Perkowska Szczypiorska:

It is difficult to describe the horror we felt. I will never forget those scenes. Some young, probably sixteen-year-old girl of exceptional beauty, who had light golden curls, like a true princess in a fairy tale, when she saw those shaved heads, she burst out crying, and even though we tried to comfort her explaining that what is most important is to keep your head because hair will grow back – it took her a long time to calm down, and get a grip. The girl fell into depression and] died after six weeks at the camp. We were all shocked by this scene, without exception, but I must admit that despite that we could not refrain from laughing when Walentyna Kielanowska approached us. No, she did not cry. She mocked herself. With a hilarious expression, without saying anything, she pulled out from underneath her clothes a small bundle, untied it, and put in front of us rollers for [curling] hair [...]²⁸

²⁵ Archiwum Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Zespół Oświadczenia, vol. 75, l. 152.

²⁶ It was on 24 August 1942. Vide D. Czech, *Kalendarz wydarzeń w KL Auschwitz*, Wydawnictwo Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu-Brzezince, Oświęcim 1992, p. 236.

²⁷ M.E. Jezierska, “Pierwszy warszawski”, in: *Kominy. Oświęcim 1940–1945*, foreword T. Hołuj, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1962, p. 133. [English version translated from Polish]

²⁸ I. Perkowska-Szczypiorska, “Kartki z Oświęcimia”, in: *Kominy...*, pp. 88–89. [English version translated from Polish]

However, the admission procedure was usually a shock for women. In the account of a Ravensbrück female prisoner, probably from the already mentioned special transport from Krakow in 1941, it is evident that the transition to the status of a prisoner marked by, i.a. the shaving of the head, entailed a long-term mental crisis.

The shock I experienced at the start (the head shaving, three nights spent in the bunker basement) took a toll on my nervous system. I lost the ability to maintain a logical train of thought. I could not talk to people because if I started a sentence, it would break off at some point (partial aphasia). That condition lasted several weeks.²⁹

Antonina Piątkowska (interned at Auschwitz-Birkenau in August 1942) stated it openly: "The lack of any underwear or even a handkerchief, heavy wooden Dutch clogs instead of shoes, the tattooing of the numbers, and the shaving of heads resulted in many of the newcomers such a shock right at the beginning that it required a lot of mental strength to shake it off. It must be added that for women the fact of their heads being shaved was probably the worst of all to bear".³⁰

It would be difficult not to notice that Polish authors recalling that stage of the admission procedure which was associated with hair most often used the generalising term of *shaving*, they referred to *removal of hair*, or shaving only the head. That was probably a result of their embarrassment, or an attempt to avoid articulating directly that what was also shaved and disinfected were arm pits, mons pubis, and the crotch. Rarely can one find accounts of the technical side of the procedure, while usually a woman to be shaved had to stand naked with her legs spread apart on two stools in front of a barber or a hairdresser. On top of that, the latter used one set of blunt tools which were never sterilised in any way. Having understood what the *shaving procedure* looked like, one cannot consider it a routine activity of a hygienic or organising nature, rather than a violation of a sexual nature, humiliation, and objectification. Immediately, the depth and the acuteness of that humiliation becomes clear.

Indeed, it was the worst thing that has ever happened to me. Well, that way you can evaluate how wrong it was. It was terrible. Because you feel like, like an animal, some cockroach that can be stepped on, and – that is terrible. It was truly terrible. What I mean is that when I'm saying that it was terrible, I don't mean that someone did something to me or that it hurt, or that it injured us. But the humiliation, that was terrible. That was simply done to us.³¹

²⁹ *Zwyciężyły wartości. Wspomnienia z Ravensbrück*, U. Wińska (ed.), Wydawnictwo Morskie, Gdańsk 1985, p. 22. [English version translated from Polish]

³⁰ A. Piątkowska, *Wspomnienia oświęcimskie*, foreword J. Masłowski, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Krakow 1977, p. 78. [English version translated from Polish]

³¹ As cited in H. Amesberger, K. Auer, B. Halbmayr, *Sexualisierte Gewalt...*, p. 82. The English version of the quoted fragment was translated from the author's Polish translation of the original fragment.

Italian Jew Elisa Springer, brought to Auschwitz in August 1944 (she was 26 years old), described shaving while lying down. It was an image which I have not found in any other Lager narratives, directly revealing an act of violation.

Upon the selection, once women were separated from men, we were led into two different barracks. There that disgusting transformation was done, which could be called the beginning of depersonalisation. We were ordered to undress completely in the presence of a few female SS women and guards armed with batons, women with evil faces – and devoid of any emotions. Then we were placed on something like doctor's beds, and shaved to the skin throughout our bodies. It was done by prisoners in white aprons, who knew something about hairdressing. They did not open their mouths, but from their silence you could presume they did it under duress. Everything inside me rebelled against such violation of my intimacy, at some point I pressed my legs together, and covered my breasts with my arms. The SS man who escorted us poked me with the barrel of his rifle, and shouted: "Spread your legs, and let yourself be shaved!" In that instant, I lost all my dignity, and no longer felt shame. [...] We were Jewish women, impure beings, designated for elimination: that was the iron-clad law of the Reich.³²

The final sentence in the fragment constitutes a bitter and demonstrative projection of the ideology of Nazism onto oneself, an auto-ironic getting over trauma. It also reveals the symbolic character of the procedure of removing hair applied to some female prisoners upon their arrival at a camp. I am mainly interested in the practices applied to women, and their emotional reactions to them, as it often extracts an additional significant dimension of specific situations. It is impossible to assess to what extent the oppressors realised the symbolic nature of shaving.³³ The tradition of a ritualistic removal of one's hair reaches deep into the history of human communities, yet one cannot possibly expect that such an intellectual realisation accompanied the camp practices for humiliating the prisoners (approx. half of the German personnel had only elementary education). It was rather a conviction acquired with the Nazi propaganda message that they were dealing with Untermenschen, which was clearly indicated, e.g. during women's and men's head shaving shows done outside the camps if they were accused of violating the ban on racial mixing.

Of course, to some extent, in line with the official justification, the shaving of people's hair was justified by hygienic reasons. Germans feared lice, and the typhus they spread. Then again, the mass delousing operations in the camps were carried out sloppily, without ensuring any efficiency. They constituted yet another form of extermination rather than a preventive action. Nonetheless, orders regarding the shaving of hair were somewhat organisational, and, basically, through

³² E. Springer, *Milczenie żywych. W cieniu Auschwitz, opowieść o śmierci i zmartwychwstaniu*, trans. Krystyna and Eugeniusz Kabatcow, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oświęcim 2001, pp. 72–73. [English version translated from Polish]

³³ That was reported in the works of, e.g. Kazimierz Banek (*Opowieści o włosach. Zwyczaje, rytuały, symbolika*, Trio, Warsaw 2010), Emil Durkheim, James Frazer, Erving Goffman, and Harold Garfinkel.

violence and domination, they defined the position of female prisoners. Maria Rutkowska-Kurcyuszowa's recollections from Ravensbrück clearly reflect that additional aspect of the transition into the prison state: "a parade of naked, shivering women, shocked with their own helplessness, in front of a bunch of SS men was a purposefully devised initiation into camp life".³⁴ Therefore, the reference of the admission procedures with hair shaving to specific national groups was meaningful, as they clearly defined the inferiority of Jewish, Russian, and Polish women in relation to other nationalities, and instrumentally – through the stigma of a shaved head visible from a distance – indicated them as the objects of extermination. One must still bear in mind that in specific instances, the fact of shaving one's head depended on the camp in question, date of arrival, and most of all on the arbitrary, i.e. often random, decision of the SS.

The ritualistic and symbolic nature of the shaving was paradoxically also emphasised by the fact that it did not apply to special prisoners. It would be difficult to imagine the shaving of the head of, e.g. Karolina Lanckorońska, who had in Ravensbrück extremely comfortable, within camp terms, conditions.³⁵ On the same basis, the admission procedure omitted shaving in the case of women POWs, a status applied to women who participated in the Warsaw Uprising. A relocation to the Mosdorf transition camp (upon internment at Lamsdorf) did not entail shaving of one's head, but a bath and delousing. Though women placed in a Stalag or an Oflag possessed freedoms far exceeding that of female internees of concentration camps, e.g. they retained their private items, they were not exploited in forced labour, or subject to the daily terror of a KL, they too gave in to the well-known emotions: helplessness, humiliation, and shame. The male personnel, however, behaved somewhat differently than those in concentration camps.

We undressed – and in just two or three minutes we become someone else than a moment earlier. We entered as an organised group with a wartime status which was important for us and known to our guards. Now, we stood in front of them as an anonymous group of naked women. Paralysed with humiliation, and shivering with cold awaiting what will happen next. [...] The order to move to the next room was a relief. "Delousing" awaited us there. The act of soaking our hair in a basin filled with stinking liquid seemed to me, actually, much less painful than the grim show [bath], in which we were the grotesque actresses, while the Wachmans and functionaries were the audience. The latter, actually, deserve a few warm words. From the very first moment, they were evidently embarrassed by the situation in which they were ordered to work [...], they approached us with kindness, as well as moving, in our absurd situation, tact. [...] Those "deloused" (very few actually needed it), and cleaned were ordered to wait once again, this time for clothing.³⁶

³⁴ M. Rutkowska-Kurcyuszowa, *Kamyki Dawida...*, p. 148.

³⁵ K. Lanckorońska, *Wspomnienia wojenne. 22.IX.1939–5.IV.1945*, introduction L. Kalinowski and E. Orman, Znak, Krakow 2001.

³⁶ I. Jurgielewiczowa, *Strategia czekania*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw 1982, pp. 117–118. [English version translated from Polish]

One's existence in a Lager entailed the establishing of new practices of camp community life. The regrowing of hair was a measure of the passing of time, it meant transition from a Zugang, and settling or rooting in camp life.³⁷

Delousing operations constituted a separate part of the Lager experience, an issue which I shall not discuss in this text. Delousing, actually devoid of any hygienic-medical significance, was in fact a form of harassment, and yet another form of extermination; naked women were, e.g. kept in freezing temperatures for a dozen hours or more. Then they received someone else's still loused (even if feeding insects were killed off, nits remained in the folds of the clothes, which a few hours later hatched into lice) clothes, often still poisonous with active Zyklon. The sick ones, weakened to such an extent that they could not kill lice themselves, were finished off by the operation. The healthy ones had but one more opportunity to "in the best case scenario" catch a cold.

As new women were admitted to the station at KL Lublin, Polish personnel tried to examine their heads. If the women had lice, their heads were shaved. Danuta Brzosko-Mędryk in a camp biography of Wanda Ossowska (*Matylda*) discussed the degree of lousing of those who did not have the strength to struggle for better hygiene. "I once let through a sick woman, a very sick Russian woman without examining her hair. It was one-centimetre-long or so. When I approached her thirty minutes later, to my horror I saw a bald skull. What I had assumed was hair, was, in fact, a layer of lice".³⁸

Within the available resources, women sought after ways to remove the insects, and regain healthy scalps. The main procedure was mutual nit-picking; one way of achieving some level of asepsis was sometimes urinotherapy. Thus described it Urszula Kisiel, prisoner of Toruń's Szmalcówka, a Stutthof subcamp: "We treated ourselves with our own urine externally and internally. When my head was covered in pus from lice, others, to heal me, urinated on my head".³⁹ Such a form of mutual aid in terms of hygiene, and "medicine" also indicated a particular camp bond between the women. That applied not only to the "families" described in historical literature, but also to a whole spectrum of diverse relations from purely sexual, through different shades of relationships engaging also the body, to extremely strong "survival bonds", made for life, more important than any later relationships with men (like the relationship of the two female protagonists of the novel entitled *Przejście przez Morze Czerwone* by Zofia Romanowiczowa). Mutual nit-picking, combing,⁴⁰ help in washing the head with a small

³⁷ That measure of the passing of time, and the evolution of a "Zugang" into the so-called "old number" appeared also in men's literature and testimonies.

³⁸ D. Brzosko-Mędryk, *Matylda*, pp. 136–137.

³⁹ As cited in: T.S. Ceran, *Szmalcówka*, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Bydgoszcz–Gdańsk 2010, p. 85.

⁴⁰ In Lager literature, and women's testimonies one will also find many depictions of similar situations: "I remember from there [Ravensbrück, the Czech block, 1943 – note by B. Cz.] a trifle,

amount of drinking “herbal infusions” were a form of sisterhood, or the survival bond. An icon of those relations could be Maria Hiszpańska’s 1944 pencil etching made in Ravensbrück entitled *Tępienie wszy w obozie Ravensbrück*.⁴¹ It presents two female prisoners, one sitting, viewed from the side, the other lying down, viewed from the front, resting her elbow and arm on the knees of the other. The one sitting is bent over the head of the one lying down, and skims her fingers through the other’s hair. Even though it is a scene of nit-picking, the emphatic closeness of the women, and their immersion in the activity being performed paradoxically sheltered them from the insanity, and the terror of the camp reality.

The shaving included in the camp reception procedure, which was an element of the Nazi rigour, affected women particularly severely. Thus the act of depriving one of one’s hair fulfilled one of the key roles within the system of penalties utilised against them. Michał Piotrowski, being a prisoner of the men’s sector of Ravensbrück, observed the neighbouring women’s part of the camp: “At KL Ravensbrück, men and women were treated alike, they were not differentiated in any way. For any trivial issue, they shaved a woman’s hair to the bare skin”.⁴²

Within the whole host of punishments used there towards Polish women, Wanda Kiedrzyńska also listed shaving one’s hair for having intercourse with Germans. Racial purity was also supposed to apply to German women. In March 1940, Himmler stipulated that for “dishonourable conduct”, i.e. having sexual intercourse with forced labourers from the vanquished countries, German women were to be subjected to public punishments, which were to serve as deterrents, especially for the youth. The punishment was supposed to consist of shaving one’s head, and leading the woman being punished through her village, with a sign on her chest describing the offence.⁴³ Urszula Wińska thus reported the harassment of a female political prisoner of German nationality: “Within a 400-person column of women of various nationalities, I would have missed one had it not been for her recently shaved head (until the end I remained mindful of that detail of camp operations). [...] We knew that shaving the heads of German women was a punishment for forbidden love with a foreigner. The woman did not appear to have committed such a crime”.⁴⁴ As it later turned out, the German woman was serving in the camp

a strange image with the camp life in the background, indicating the tranquillity present in that barracks. Every day at dawn before the roll call, one of the Czechs combed the long blond hair of Maryla, who pinned it up in a heavy knot at the back of her head”, A. Truszkowska-Kulniczowa, *Mój XX wiek...*, p. 120. [English version translated from Polish]

⁴¹ A copy of the etching is exhibited in Gdańsk’s Museum of the Second World War, in a section of the exhibition devoted to concentration camps and the Holocaust.

⁴² M. Piotrowski, *Nie tylko w Ravensbruck...*, p. 91. [English version translated from Polish]

⁴³ H. Amesberger, K. Auer, B. Halbmayr, *Sexualisierte Gewalt...*, p. 80.

⁴⁴ *Serca niezagaste. Wspomnienia więźniarek z Ravensbruck*, selection M. Piotrowska Kogut and A. Gierczak, A. Gierczak (ed.), introduction J. Zaborowski, Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, Warsaw 1979, pp. 175–176.

a sentence for violating the meat-free day maintained in the Third Reich. She fed her son, who returned home wounded from the eastern front.

At the camp, they shaved her head, and she got 25 lashes from a machine. She could have gone home a month later, but she could not withstand the assigned punishment [she fainted during flogging – note by B. Cz.] Upon the next shaving, she withstood only 15 lashes. [...] Two years later, in January 1945, I met her at the station. [...] I recognised her for her recently shaved head.⁴⁵

Urszula Wińska also described a fact regarding another German female prisoner:

Her head was shaved. When asked about the reason, she said: – [...] Because I was a human being. I was picking apples in the garden. [...] POWs were passing by, and looked hungrily at the fruit. She emptied over the fence a basket full of apples in front of them. [...] Two hours later, the Gestapo took her away.⁴⁶

Particularly striking is the recollection of a situation recorded in various accounts, both literary and testimonies, by former Auschwitz-Birkenau female internees. The following is an account by Antonina Piątkowska; a more extensive part is worth quoting:

Before the return to the camp, SS men counted the unit. It turned out that our group was missing a female prisoner from Łódź marked with a green triangle, i.e. non-political. The rest of our column was hurried through the gate where SS men reported the escape of the woman. We were led into the camp. Some time later, the entire camp elite appeared: commandant Rudolf Hoess, director of the political division Grabner, the famous murderer Gerhard Palitzsch, Hans Aumeier, and many more. We were ordered to stand at attention, and we were guarded so closely that you could not even twitch. The Gestapo officers announced that we were to be decimated. There were 200 Polish women, so 20 had to die. The threats were repeated with plenty of shouting and verbal abuse, but we couldn't care less. Let those Germans shoot already instead of telling us for hours on end that they will shoot. We stood completely motionlessly looking straight in the eyes of the Gestapo, and even those who exactly calculated that if we were counted by tens, they would die, did not twitch or break.

Several hours later a decision came over the phone from Berlin that the escapee was not a political prisoner, so the Polish women will not be decimated, but instead their punishment will be the shaving of hair, and sending them to a penal company in Budy (the so-called Strafkompagnie – SK). And when Hoess ordered that ordinance to be translated, suddenly there arose an indescribable turbulence among the women. The same women who stood calmly bravely awaiting their death, immediately broke down upon hearing the news that... their heads are to be shaved. They cared nothing about the surrounding Gestapo, about the entire Auschwitz commando standing in front of them. They screamed that they will not let them cut their hair, they cried, and despaired. The turbulence grew becoming completely unmanageable, so at some point the Gestapo retreated leaving us under the supervision of SS-Aufseherinnen

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 176.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 177.

(female guards). They displayed no willingness for any stronger action. They only ordered the block master and the kapo to execute the order, while they themselves preferred not to approach the furious and desperate internees. Women for ever... For them not death but disfiguring was the worst thing possible. They rebelled in the face of an order to become disfigured, a desperate rebellion, inconsiderate of any possible consequences.⁴⁷

For a long time I believed that such scenes offered an iconic representation of the theme of the hair of women interned in. I considered as particularly expressive, shocking even, the fact that they remained calm in the face of the threat of being decimated, and the hysteria upon hearing the announced punishment of shaving their hair. However, Michał Wójcik's extensive interview with Zofia Posmycz, who witnessed that event, which was published several months ago, weakened that idealised vision:

Finally, an order: march out for Budy. Immediately. And Budy is a subcamp, a few kilometres behind the main camp. Strafkompanie camp, SK for short. Only later did I hear, it was consulted with Berlin. We were saved by the fact that the escapee was a criminal and not a political prisoner. Apparently it was the first time that the Germans did not apply decimation. How merciful of them. [...] Then our hair was cut. Only then. But we were so bewildered that it made no considerable impression on any of us.⁴⁸

And in relation to the issue raised by me in this text it seems that the fact of juxtaposing sources may offer unexpected outcomes.

Many women's narratives show that in the camp community of women: internees, functionaries, and guards, such emotions as envy or jealousy emerged often. One might remember the tragic history of the pretty (and endowed with curly hair) girl named Lilly, the protagonist of a story by Liana Millu entitled *Lilly Marlene* from the *Dymy Birkenau* collection. Another situation, also stemming from jealousy, was recalled by the fifteen-year-old Jewish girl Zofia Minc:

That night, for the first time since I came to Oświęcim, someone helped me. He was a German kapo, a criminal, who was sentenced to twelve years in prison. I told him that my mother was sick, so he brought her some wheat bread. [...] I went to work alone but the Aufseherin noticed that a German kapo had helped me, and as a punishment she immediately shaved my hair which had already grown back a bit, and ordered me to crouch jump around the dressing room.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ A. Piątkowska, *Wspomnienia oświęcimskie*, p. 52. [English version translated from Polish]

⁴⁸ Z. Posmycz, *Królestwo za mgłą*, Znak, Krakow 2017, p. 86. [English version translated from Polish] That situation, though presented differently, appeared also in the fictionalised recollections of Z. Posmycz: "We were deeply hurt by the loss of our hair. SK? Strafkompanie? That meant nothing to us", Z. Posmycz, *Ten sam doktor M*, Iskry, Warsaw 1981, pp. 16–17. [English version translated from Polish]

⁴⁹ *Dzieci żydowskie w czasach Zagłady. Wczesne świadectwa 1944–1948. Relacje dziecięce z Centralnej Żydowskiej Komisji Historycznej*, O. Orzeł (ed.), trans. E. Bergman, P. Kendziorek, K. Szymaniak, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny im. Emanuela Ringelbluma, Warsaw 2014, p. 198. [English version translated from Polish]

One more aspect of punitive hair shaving is noteworthy. It applied to a Polish female prisoner at Ravensbrück, a voluntary candidate for the Puff [Nazi brothel], and it was performed by other Polish female inmates. That was described not only by Wanda Kiedrzyńska in a monograph of the camp; let us read an account of that event written by Stanisława Młodkowska Bielawska:

One day the camp commandant summoned all the female prisoners to the camp square, and presumptuously offered that if there are those who would like to have better food and living conditions, they should report to leave for the brothel. We, the political prisoners, considered it a great insult, turned around outraged, and marched in rows to our blocks. A few younger ones, when they learnt that a Polish woman agreed to leave, attacked her in the evening, and cut her hair. They gave her a few cuts in doing so because the scissors were blunt.⁵⁰

That occurred in 1944. It indicates several things, e.g. the differences in the severity of the discipline between specific camps within specific periods. It would be hard to imagine a situation in 1941 or 1942 in Auschwitz for female prisoners to be able to freely and without any negative consequences leave without a direct order from the camp commandant to do so. The presented situation had yet another meaning. It is an argument in favour of the ethos-based attitudes of Polish women, who through the act of shaving the hair of another female prisoner of their own nationality expressed their opposition towards disgracing Polishness. I, however, see the shaving prisoners playing a double role, i.e. as prisoners/oppressors in a sense cooperating with the camp system of violence and humiliation.

At the camp, there was a ban on personal tampering with one's hair, even if only to shorten it a bit, even more so in the, still in 1941, model camp in Ravensbrück. Wanda Kiedrzyńska thus summarised the story of one of the female prisoners: "In January 1941, when it was -20 degrees outside, the 18-year-old Henryka Derasówna was accused of shortening her hair, and sentenced to 2 weeks in the bunker. She remained in an unheated dark room, receiving only bread and coffee, and lunch every four days. When she was released from it, she got an infection in her legs due to frostbite, and even though they were amputated, Derasówna died".⁵¹

The prisoners themselves tried to prevent pediculosis by illegally cutting their long hair. Halina Birenbaum was sent to Majdanek (later Auschwitz, Ravensbrück, and Neustadt-Glewe) aged just 13 (in 1943). At that time, she had long hair which her mother pinned up in a crown, which seemed to give the girl a few extra years, making her externally more adult, thus saving her from the fate which befell children. But when her mother was gassed, there was no one to maintain her hair, and on top of that, since it was so beautiful and striking, it made her vulnerable to the jealousy of the functionaries or guards, i.e. death. Therefore, Halina's sister-in-law

⁵⁰ S. Młodkowska-Bielawska, *Wspomnienia okupacyjne*, editing, introduction and notes by R. Stopikowski, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 2001, p. 60. [English version translated from Polish]

⁵¹ W. Kiedrzyńska, *Ravensbrück...*, p. 48.

Hela took care of Halina's hair. "When we entered Majdanek, there was a roll call [...], while Hela secretly borrowed some scissors from someone, which were passed hand to hand during the roll call from hand to hand; with a quick and skilful motion she cut both my braids, and immediately buried them in the ground with her foot. [...] I was completely indifferent to that hair cutting".⁵² There might be more dramatic tension in the 13-year-old's burial of her hair, which she experienced with stupefied indifference, in the square during the roll call, than the cutting which was mourned loudly. Unnaturally, in virtually unpathetic circumstances, there occurred as if a symbolic burial of girliness, youth, and innocence.

Hair, in a manner visible at first sight, separated the world of freedom from the world of the camp. In her poetic prose, Charlotte Delbo presented an image of the town of Oświęcim through which a group of female prisoners marched: "This city we were passing through was a strange city. Women wore hats perched on curly hair. They also wore shoes and stockings as it is done in town".⁵³ That actually rather obvious list of that which the female prisoners lacked: hats, hair, shoes, and stockings, reflected not only the camp misery, but also a different mental condition of femininity in the camp. One which was deprived of its attributes, stripped of attractiveness, and humiliated. It also signified the tragedy of the chasm between the worlds of the two "types" of women, i.e. prisoners and inhabitants of Oświęcim, the latter with curled hair, decorated with hats. Yet in a broader view, it was also an image of the civilisational division, and the deep stigmatisation caused by WWII and concentration camps. It will not suffice to, once liberated, curl the hair and buy a hat to return to life. Delbo seemed to have already realised that. Soon after that event she entitled her memoirs written down in 1946 *None of Us Will Return*.

Hair/lack thereof was a sign of dividing one's life into "before the camp" and "after the camp". If retained, it constituted not only a basic element of a woman's attractiveness, but also a sign of dignity which had not been violated. The fact of shaving, even if witnessed by other female inmates who suffered the same violation, was downgrading, it meant depersonification, and it cancelled the natural rights for the freedom of emotions.

She did not see herself. She did not know what the hair shaving procedure turned her into. She was no longer pretty or fresh, or even young. Her face with the bristle of unevenly cut hair sticking out above the forehead was marked by the stigma of shame, and did not evoke associations with a wronged child. A smile on such a face evoked outrage as something improper, and unfitting.⁵⁴

⁵² H. Birenbaum, *Nadzieja umiera ostatnia*, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oświęcim 2014, p. 100. [English version translated from Polish]

⁵³ Ch. Delbo, *Żaden z nas nie powróci*, trans. K. Malczewska-Giovanetti, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oświęcim 2002, p. 141. [English version: Delbo Ch., *Auschwitz and After*. Yale University 1995]

⁵⁴ Z. Posmysz, *Ten sam doktor M*, p. 19.

In her literary analysis, Posmysz revealed a mechanism characteristic of a sexual violation, and its consequences, i.e. stigmatisation and downgrading.

When relating to hair, camp literature and testimonies indicate today the already effaced difference between the sexes. Wachsmann quoted the much telling words: “«with our bald heads, we looked like men», another prisoner noted in her diary”.⁵⁵ An external observer was helpless when faced with shaved women’s heads; the insecurity evoked by such a woman’s appearance was reflected in an account by the Norwegian, Sylvia Salvesen: “for the first time in my life, I saw beings whom I could not define either as men or women. Their heads were shaved, they were gaunt, dirty, and broken with their tragedy. There was no term to describe them other than that they had «death» in their eyes”.⁵⁶ A strikingly similar image and a dilemma associated with sexual identity lost along with hair was offered in a poem by Primo Levi: “Consider if this is a woman / Without hair and without name / With no more strength to remember / Her eyes empty and her womb cold / Like a frog in winter”.⁵⁷ Szymon Laks, interned at Auschwitz from July 1942, said a similar thing: “my eyes are drawn to strange figures, moving behind the second row of barbed wire. What creations are those? Human beings? Midgits? Children? A few of them came closer to the wires, and only then I could identify them! Those creatures, dressed in Soviet uniforms, with shaved skulls, and emaciated faces, were women! Or rather they used to be women once”.⁵⁸

The degree to which women’s hair constituted an element of individualisation destroyed in the camp is indicated by this emotional, perhaps filled with experienced shock, recollection by a former prisoner:

we were sent to a place where we had to get rid of all our clothing, leave it on the floor. They told us that we will take a shower, we did not know anything about a proper shower or about a shower that was not a shower at all. We walked to that place, and they started shaving our hair, that did not hurt us, and they did not hurt us, not then. But it was terrible to be shaved by SS men, who did not behave badly in any way. It would be unjust if I said they had done something bad to us then. But the fact of having my head shaved was, for me, one of the worst things that had ever happened to me, because you then feel more than naked, you feel downgraded. Yes, it was terrible. And then we went for the showers, shaved throughly, and without our clothes, without anything. There was a young woman next to me, shaved just like me, who said: “Where are you, Klara? Where are you?” I responded: “Well, if you’re Maria, then I’m standing right next to you”. We didn’t know each other. What I want to say is that it was terrible.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ N. Wachsmann, *Historia nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych*, p. 259.

⁵⁶ As cited in: W. Kiedrzyńska, *Ravensbrück...*, p. 58. [English version translated from Polish]

⁵⁷ P. Levi, *Czy to jest człowiek?*, trans. H. Wiśniowska, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Krakow 1978, p. 7. [English version: L. Primo. *If This Is a Man*. London 2004]

⁵⁸ Sz. Laks, *Gry oświęcimskie*, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oświęcim 1998, p. 36. [English version translated from Polish]

⁵⁹ As cited in: H. Amesberger, K. Auer, B. Halbmayr, *Sexualisierte Gewalt...*, p. 81.

The style of one's hair, and the fact of having it at all, constitute important elements of culture. Many camp narratives also indicated hair as an attribute of the community structure developed there. Kept hair and its condition separated functionary female prisoners, prominent figures, and often political prisoners from "regular" Häftlings. A particular hairstyle could also signify affiliation to a better unit, e.g. *kanadyнки* at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where access to items stolen from murdered Jews enabled the female internees to apply hair dressing procedures.⁶⁰ Hair, being a visible indication of sexual attractiveness, and special treatment (e.g. bigger food rations, separate barracks), was also kept by women employed at camp Puffs: the fate of those women is a topic sufficient for a separate monograph. The degree to which hair indicated a person's location within the camp hierarchy was indicated in a narrative by Seweryna Szmaglewska:

Then, at the threshold, there stood a beautiful man wearing no hat. His brown softly wavy hair glistened with the whole richness of the privilege he was endowed by the camp authorities who allowed him to avoid shaving to the skin. Hair in the camp was almost like a halo. I looked at its magnificent glare [...] who was he exactly? Konrad Wallenrod? Or a regular bandit? Direct, naive, sometimes cheeky, he knew how to utilise his assets: beauty, eloquence, the privilege of long hair. We noticed that new SS men, who joined the Oświęcim squad in the summer of 1944, were particularly sensitive towards that last feature. For them a functionary with hair was no longer despicable. Maybe within the whole host of hairless camp apes he seemed someone special, to whom they could not bluntly say *Arschloch* or shout *ferflucht Schwein*. It was sometimes the case, absolutely astonishing to us, that when talking to Kurt, the Gestapo used the form with "self".⁶¹

The author of the story entitled "Wielkie róże to znaczy Gross-Rosen" described Kurt Reinhold, a German Oberkapo, interned for tax fraud, who did not have to wear the "emblem": "That privilege was accompanied by another one: the right to grow longer hair".⁶² Hair in a community function, so to speak, revealed one more paradox of the Lagered world. On the one hand, later often referred to as "another planet", "another world", or the "anti-world", it had at its disposal mechanisms from outside the barbed wire, its internal structure (e.g. social hierarchy) referred to the stereotypes and social reactions of the environment.

When the female prisoners from the Politische Büro Unit entered the barracks accompanied by an Aufseherin – all eyes were on them. Their appearance was astonishing. [...] they wore skilfully sown black silk aprons with long sleeves, with overlapping white collars; they were well kept, without kerchiefs, with carefully styled hair, clean, and fragrant [...] Among them there were Jews, Poles, and women of other nationalities. [...] we looked at them with interest,

⁶⁰ Vide, e.g. Sz. Laks, *Gry oświęcimskie*, p. 101.

⁶¹ S. Szmaglewska, "Wielkie róże to znaczy Gross-Rosen", in: *ibid.*, *Chleb i nadzieja*, Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, Warsaw 1960, pp. 121–123. [English version translated from Polish]

⁶² Sz. Laks, *Gry oświęcimskie*, p. 36.

as well as with aversion, because they evoked mistrust in us. It was actually baffling that some were so dirty, covered in rags, and resembling ghouls, while they, though prisoners too, were clean, fresh, they looked healthy, and, on top of that, they had hair.⁶³

Hair also documented the difference in the fortunes of Aryan and Jewish women, where entire transports of the latter were shaved upon being gassed to death. Paradoxically, initial shaving was a fortunate circumstance as it indicated inclusion into the group of camp internees not designated for immediate extermination. Part of a testimony by Ewa Borger, a Jew, a former prisoner at Neusalz, interned in 1944: “Penalties for the smallest offence were introduced. For talking to Polish women, they would shave your hair, or leave you outside in freezing temperatures, without a coat, for 10–12 hours”.⁶⁴

On the “different planet” of the camp, the culturally fundamental significance of hair as an attribute of a woman’s attractiveness, of her erotic and sexual qualities, was also retained. That is, again, a broad problem area, which I shall not discuss in this text. The extent of the significance of hair was intersected by the sense of humanity as one’s identification of having it somewhere, even in a state of physical emaciation. In fact, even Muslim women tried to cover their bald heads. In *Wspomnienia oświęcimskie* by Antonina Piątkowska, one can read: “With that [shaving] not only the newcomers could not cope, but even those that later became Muslims. Often enough one could see in Muslim women, already indifferent to anything that was happening around, a reaction to cover their shaved heads with at least their hands, or wrapping around it anything they could find. They cried frantically when they had nothing to cover their heads with, and they calmed down once they got from other inmates even a scrap of cloth”.⁶⁵

Other meanings are uncovered in the accounts by camp barbers and hairdressers, both those saucily recalling their “female clients” standing in front of them on stools,⁶⁶ and those bearing the biggest dramatic gravity, i.e. the recollections of barbers from death camps. It seems imperative to quote at least a small fragment of a literary narrative, which, though in formal style, adds gravity to that extreme experience.

On the podium for the witnesses, there stood Samuel Reisman, red with exhaustion. It was hard for him to tackle his emotions. He talked about the work at Himmelfahrstrasse at Treblinka [...] According to the plan, it took only ten minutes to finish off all men from a transport. Women took longer, a striking fifteen minutes, because prior to stepping into the gas

⁶³ I. Perkowska-Szczypiorska, *Kartki z Oświęcimia*, p. 90. [English version translated from Polish]

⁶⁴ Testimony report stored at the Sources Institute (Polski Instytut Źródłowy) in Lund, published in: *Mówią świadkowie Ravensbrück. Wybór*, introduction and editing E.S. Kruszewski, Instytut Polsko-Skandynawski, Copenhagen 2001, p. 7. [English version translated from Polish]

⁶⁵ A. Piątkowska, *Wspomnienia oświęcimskie*, pp. 78–79. [English version translated from Polish]

⁶⁶ J.M. Tired, “Blok jedenasty”, in: *Kominy...*, p. 208.

chamber, they had to be shaved... "Why?" asked the judge. "Due to their hair, a valuable resource for producing mattresses..."⁶⁷

Finally, a small tribute to the aesthetics of the literary presentation: in women's accounts, there often appear images,⁶⁸ or even landscapes containing bald heads. Let me use an example of the highest artistic value. The painter's imagination of Charlotte Delbo offered virtual frames, repeatable plastic shots with the dominant presence of a shaved head, which constitutes a telling centre of the image.

At first, we doubt that we'd seen what we'd seen. It's hard to tell them from the snow. The yard is full of them. Naked. Stacked side by side. White, a blueish whiteness against the snow. Heads shaved, pubic hair straight and stiff. The corpses are frozen. White with brown toenails;⁶⁹

All of a sudden, on the road running along the barbed-wire fences, a truck appears. It rides noiselessly over the snow. It is an open truck which ought to be used to carry gravel. It is full of women. They are all standing in it, bareheaded. Small, shaven, boy-like, narrow heads. They are tightly squeezed against one another. The truck moves silently with all these heads sharply profiled against the blue of the day. A silent truck sliding along the barbed wire like some careful ghost. A frieze of faces against the sky.⁷⁰

The chain of quotations regarding the camp experiences of women associated with hair seems to be endless, and the taxonomy of the cases could be developed much more. "Scenes with hair" constitute in women's narratives a borderline, past which there lie the tabooed, drastic, and tragic, morally non-normative, or reserved for an area outside of heroic narratives, women's experiences. Of camp lesbians, prostitutes at the Puffs, female prisoners trading sex for food and clothes, Jewish mothers murdering their newborns of the slim chance for their own survival, pregnant women procuring abortions to be able to remain part of labour units, women violated in camp pseudo-scientific experiments, and sexually assaulted not only by camp tormentors, but also by Eastern and Western camp liberators. A snippet of the sadistic camp women's hell (after 1942 women's fatality rate exceed that of men)⁷¹ is offered in the notes of Sonderkommando prisoners.

Or Scharführer Forst. On the arrival of many transports, he stood in the gate of the dressing room, and groped the sexual organs of each young woman walking naked into the gas chamber.

⁶⁷ S. Szmaglewska, "Człowiek wolny przed międzynarodowym trybunałem", in: *ibid.*, *Chleb i nadzieja*, p. 185.

⁶⁸ "What I saw in front of me was as if an image from hell. Not because something terrible was happening there, but because for the first time in my life I saw beings, about which I could not say whether they were men or women. Their heads were shaved, they were gaunt, dirty, and broken with their tragedy", W. Kiedrzyńska, *Ravensbrück...*, pp. 97–98.

⁶⁹ Ch. Delbo, *Żaden z nas nie powróci*, p. 31.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁷¹ N. Wachsmann, *Historia nazistowskich...*, p. 393.

There were also cases when German SS men, of all ranks, stuck fingers into the sexual organs of young pretty girls;⁷²

[...] were disgraced [...] with knives [...] to naked girls [...] in a terrible way [...] they thrust batons into the bottom parts of their bodies [...] until they died in terrible pain and suffering [...] terrible people [...] the sadists pulled out [...] forced to rape [...] children [...] too [they?] [...] were taken [...] and the wives in their families [...].⁷³

The topic of hair is a piece of the history of intimacy of women in the camp, but it merely opens its purgatory.

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⁷² Unknown author (later identified as L. Langfus), “Rękopis”, in: *Wśród koszarnej zbrodni. Notatki więźniów Sonderkommando*, 2nd edition extended, Wydawnictwo Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu, Oświęcim 1973, p. 172.

⁷³ The events, described in fragments, most probably took place in the transitional camp in Małkinia. Z. Lewental, “Rękopis”, in: *Wśród koszarnej zbrodni...*, p. 194.

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Women's hair in Lager narratives

(Summary)

The article offers an analysis of women's Lager narratives in which the procedure of removing hair from female prisoners of concentration camps was reflected. It indicates the procedure's cultural, social, and psychological meanings presenting it as an element of the extensive camp strategy of violence, a ritual of downgrading, and a form of violating a woman's identity and intimacy. By presenting various circumstances in which women were shaved in the camps, it also indicates the situation-based complexity of the camp experience, its various stages, and contexts. The text refers to various sources, and considers the experiences of women of various nationalities, e.g. Germans, Poles, and Jews.

Key words: women's Lager experiences; women's camp narratives; hair, shaving, corporeality; rape