

# Introduction

Pain wrenches us from our everyday routine and allows us to experience the limits of our corporeal existence. It takes us to the brink, beyond which there is only the threat of death and the horror of corpses. The word turns into a cry, babble, howl. And in the end – into silence. And yet, the encounter with pain, with suffering and danger, brings recognition. Death confirms that life has meaning. Like a powerful beam of light, limit experiences provide an outline to our human shape, they draw it out from the shadows.

This book is about breaking the kind of stereotypical thinking by which the macabre is merely something horrible and repulsive; the paralyzing fear of death is simply overpowering; and what is terrible and injurious is only destruction. The pathologist does an autopsy in order to reveal the secrets of the functioning of the human organism. The anatomy of a dead body provides truth about the living body.

It is the goal of this book to show that limit experiences do not leave only a vacuum in their wake; that it is possible to represent them; that, through the examination of their various forms, we can reach the essence of human existence and man's entanglement in the world. I will keep the layers of philosophy and theoretical reflection to a minimum. I intend to remain on the level of research practice, and to concentrate on what I would call "exercises from reading."

I question the validity of the post-modern argument that limit experiences are ineffable, that their description is impossible. Talking about our inability to talk about the Holocaust (after all, the extermination of the Jews is the main subject of this discourse) seems to have become increasingly barren, because it has become increasingly predictable. The founders of this discourse left behind a full array of philosophical-poetic formulas that sound like mysterious incantations. Maurice Blanchot called the Holocaust a phenomenon in which "meaning was swallowed up," one that gave no "place to anything that can be affirmed, that can be denied," in which all thought yields to destruction and all that is left is "the mortal intensity, the fleeing silence of the countless cry."<sup>1</sup> So how is it possible to "write about disaster"? In a passage from Blanchot's esoteric work, we read: "To keep still, *preserving* silence: that is what, all unknowing, we all want to do, writing."<sup>2</sup> Over this speculative notion of paralyzing language, of the power

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1 M. Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. A. Smock (Lincoln, London: New Edition, 1995), 47.

2 *Ibid.*, 122.

of the Holocaust to overwhelm speech and to void any meaning, a shadow is cast by Blanchot's involvement in the 1930s in the activities of the right-wing Action Française.<sup>3</sup>

According to Jean-François Lyotard, not only had "reality" succumbed to the gas chambers of the Holocaust, but so too had the means hitherto used to talk about that reality. Great metanarratives, by which the entire world had been conceived as a meaningful whole, lay in ruins; their place was taken by micronarratives: fragmentary, temporary, provisional, unfinished. No longer was there a persistent point of support; rules of recognition were destroyed, were thrown into the middle of a conflict between various "phrase regimens," none of which can enjoy final or conclusive sanction. Lyotard called this unending struggle *différend*, and he made it the nucleus of his concept, which he formulated with frequent references to the Holocaust. For this French philosopher, Auschwitz was a synonym for the destruction of standard ways of naming, of making judgments, of understanding. Auschwitz also led to the destruction of the very experience of Auschwitz, since it was something so radically new in history that it canceled even the possibility to bear witness; it left us only with "the negative presentation of the indeterminate." In his work Lyotard applied the metaphor of a great earthquake that destroys all seismographic instruments and thus renders any measurement impossible.<sup>4</sup>

It is characteristic that Lyotard would refer to the names of great philosophers and their works from Plato and Aristotle, through Kant and Hegel, to Levinas, but he cited not a single word from such great eye-witnesses to Auschwitz as Elie Wiesel, Charlotte Delbo, Primo Levi, or Tadeusz Borowski. He made his argument somehow over their heads, as if he left in a black hole everything one could extract from there, including not just testimonies written post factum by those

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- 3 His texts at the time did not shun anti-Semitism, they were soaked with the rhetoric of blood and violence. By the time he published his first collection of essays in 1941, the philosopher "had repudiated the political project of which antisemitism and fascism were a part," and some scholars have claimed that the fragmentary form and historical references of *L'Écriture du désastre* (1980) "were marks of a movement in Blanchot's post-war writings toward disclosure of an uncertain past," and that "his remarks equivocated, as if the confessional impulse to reveal were offset by a fear concerning the risks that this revelation entailed." For more on these comments on Blanchot's prewar activities, see *Postmodernism and the Holocaust*, eds. Alan Milchman, Alan Rosenberg (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), 5.
- 4 J.-F. Lyotard, *The Differend; Phrases in Dispute*, trans. G. Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis 1996), 32–33, 56–58.

who had survived, but also hand-written texts buried in the ashes at the crematoria in Birkenau, documents hidden there by members of the Sonderkommando in the hope that someone would discover and read them.<sup>5</sup>

I try to avoid the trap that is the aestheticization and sublimation of the limit experience. I prefer to distance myself from the tendency to create a fetish, through the use of abstract philosophical discourse, out of the “indescribable” and the “ineffable.” Such a discourse carries the matter of the limit experience into the sphere of speculation; it performs a kind of deontologization and dematerialization, it separates the limit experience from empiricism.

The goal of this book is to embed experiences in the sources, to describe them in concrete historical situations, in concrete circumstances, in their “biographical” and “material” determinants. I try to resist the temptation to textualize experiences in such a way as to deprive them of their reference to factual reality. That having been said, it is important to remember that what I am examining here are representations of experiences, and not the experiences themselves.

I put forward the hypothesis that – in light of scholarly research into representations (in various forms) of limit experiences – the argument that, for example (and in particular), the Holocaust experience is ineffable can be convincingly made neither on empirical, nor on analytical grounds. There is a large body of testimony that originated from the very depth of the catastrophe, written in ghettos, in hiding, on scraps of paper in the camps. The obligation to give testimony is not just a commonly and explicitly-formulated message conveyed by those who wrote, and have written such testimony<sup>6</sup>; it also constitutes a new set of circumstances for the subject. The compelling need to bear witness that emerged in the wake of the Holocaust gave rise to a need to reflect on the notion of subjectivity and its application in the context of eye-witness accounts.<sup>7</sup> Analysis of these accounts allows us to approach that which has been masked or obscured, to approach the meaning that the limit experience hides within itself. A meaning that, in various ways, has been disinherited and subjected to deconstruction, but a meaning that also demands that it be saved. One can attempt to

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5 See Jadwiga Bezwińska, *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime: Manuscripts of Prisoners in Crematorium Squads Found at Auschwitz* (H. Fertig, 1973).

6 For more on the imperative to write without regard for terrifying circumstances, and on the various motivations behind texts reconstructing events *hic et nunc*, see the chapter “Dlaczego pisali?” (Why they wrote?) in my book *Tekst wobec Zagłady. (0 relacjach z getta warszawskiego)* (Wrocław 1997).

7 See D. Głowacka, “Podmiotowość jako dawanie świadectwa a literatura Holocaustu,” *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2003).

capture this meaning only through a description of a “motion of thought” that confronts, despite barriers, the difficulty of understanding.<sup>8</sup>

## Experience as an Organizing Category

It is risky to turn the word “experience” into a key conceptual category and to place it up front in the title of a book. Experience is a word that has been domesticated into our everyday language, just as it has been a conceptual category at work in European thought since Greek times and down through the present day; it has played an important role in practically every philosophical system. The popularity of this word, along with the many ways it is understood in contemporary humanities, makes it impossible – it would seem – to establish a comprehensive and coherent definition of experience. The concept of experience remains “hopelessly confused”<sup>9</sup> and “is loaded down [...] with such chronic ambiguity that no single monograph, no matter how thick, can subdue” it.<sup>10</sup> As Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote, “the concept of experience seems to me one of the most obscure we have.”<sup>11</sup> Without wading too deep into the complicated material on experience, I will introduce a few threads of thought that provide the philosophical and anthropological context for the subject of this book.<sup>12</sup>

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- 8 I draw the metaphor of the motion of thought from K. Michalski, *Heidegger i filozofia współczesna* (Warszawa 1978), 9.
- 9 These are the words of Martin Jay, author of an important monograph on experience, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005), 3; Jay points out that he does not expect to find out “what ‘experience’ really is” (p. 1), but rather examines how experience, in various forms, has been part of the philosophical discourse.
- 10 See R. Nycz, “Literatura nowoczesna wobec doświadczenia,” in *Literackie reprezentacje doświadczenia*, eds. W. Bolecki, E. Nawrocka (Warszawa 2007), 11–12.
- 11 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Second, Revised Edition, trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer, Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1993), 346. M. Oakeshott, several decades earlier, made a similar statement, writing that “‘Experience,’ of all the words in the philosophic vocabulary, is the most difficult to manage [...]” Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1978), 9.
- 12 I am following in the footsteps of E. Domańska, “Rozumienie doświadczenia w filozofii i antropologii,” in Domańska, *Mikrohistorie. Spotkania w międzyświatach*, 2nd edition, expanded and updated (Poznań 2005); see also, “Doświadczenie jako kategoria badawcza i polityczna we współczesnej anglo-amerykańskiej refleksji o przeszłości,” in *Nowoczesność jako doświadczenie: dyscypliny – paradygmaty – dyskursy*, eds.

In the field occupied by the word *doświadczenie* (experience), as it has taken shape in the Polish language, we come across four semantic components. First, *poddać próbie* (to put somebody/something to the test), in the sense of exposing to a risk, to be threatening, dangerous, both emotionally and physically. Second, *zaznać, doznać*, in the sense of feeling (pain, joy). Third, *dowieść*, in the sense of proving something with the use of experience, i.e. not through the expression of an opinion about a state of affairs, but through its (so to speak) sanctioning with the subjective strength of participation in that whose existence is proven. And fourth, *oświadczyć, zaświadczyć*, in the sense of providing testimony about (or bearing witness to) something.<sup>13</sup>

The first two semantic components of “*doświadczenie*/experience” play an essential role in the arguments made in this book, because they point – on the one hand – to the threat posed by that which becomes the object of experience, and – on the other hand – to the sensorial aspect of experience. In other words: I am not interested here in any kind of mystical experience, but rather in experience whose foundation is material, corporeal. The next two components – *dowieść* and *oświadczyć* – are also important for my arguments, since they imply the category of evidence, testimony. Barbara Skarga has emphasized that “the word *doświadczenie* contains within itself testimony. *Doświadczenie* is thus to testify about something, and one who experiences is, quite simply, a witness.”<sup>14</sup> I treat the entire range of source material analyzed in this book as testimony.<sup>15</sup>

Of the two terms used by Wilhelm Dilthey to define experience – *Erfahrung* (from the German verb *fahren*: to go, to travel) and *Erlebnis* (from the German noun *Leben*: life), the most important to me is *Erlebnis* (in Polish,

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A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, R. Nycz (Warszawa 2008); R. Nycz, op. cit.; A. Radomski, “Pojęcie doświadczenia we współczesnej refleksji humanistycznej i w historiografii - jego zmiana jako rezultat przeobrażeń kulturowych w świecie współczesnym,” *Historyka* 29 (1999).

13 The semantic field of the Polish word *doświadczenie*, along with its etymology, were reconstructed in R. Nycz, “0 nowoczesności jako doświadczeniu. Uwagi na wstępie,” in *Nowoczesność jako doświadczenie*, eds. R. Nycz, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska (Kraków 2006), 12–16.

14 B. Skarga, “Doświadczenie,” in Skarga, *Kwintet metafizyczny* (Kraków 2005), 120.

15 On the matter of testimony with reference to the Holocaust experience, see, among others, S. Felman, “The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann’s ‘Shoah,’” in *Testimonies: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. S. Felman, D. Laub (New York 1992); D. Głowacka, “Jak echo bez źródła. Podmiotowość jako dawanie świadectwa a literatura Holocaustu,” *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2003); K. Olivier, “Witnessing and Testimony,” *Parallax* 11 (2004); D. Laub, “Zdarzenie bez świadka: prawda, świadectwo oraz ocalenie,” *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2007).

*przeżycie*: experience, something survived), the basis of cognition and a prerequisite for understanding. Life is manifested in *Erlebnis*, a word that contains within itself a special semanti intensity. As Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote:

An experience is as much distinguished from other experiences - in which other things are experienced - as it is from the rest of life in which “nothing” is experienced. An experience is no longer just something that flows past quickly in the stream of conscious life; it is meant as a unity and thus attains a new mode of being *one*.<sup>16</sup>

For the person who is the subject of *Erlebnis*, that experience has a strength and persistence of its own, it constitutes the form by which that person is recognized. Gadamer suggested that the word *Erlebnis* “ultimately stems from its use in autobiography.”<sup>17</sup> For me this is a key assertion because the source material used in my analysis here is taken broadly from autobiographical records. For the studies referred to in this book, two specific features of *Erlebnis* appear to be important: first, a special directness (“everything that is experienced is experienced by oneself”).<sup>18</sup> And second, the occurrence of a state in which one “goes beyond oneself” into a sphere that cannot be comprehended through reason.

For cultural anthropology, the problem remains: can one know the experiences of another person, and if so, in what way? From the perspective of philosophy, we can formulate the matter with the question: does experience give itself up to representation, and if so, in what way? Edward M. Bruner conceived the relationship between experience and its representation as a triangle: (1) objective reality; (2) experience in which that reality presents itself; and (3) expressions of that reality. There thus exists a fundamental difference between life experienced/survived (reality), life experienced (experience), and life that is voiced (expression).<sup>19</sup> Frank Ankersmit came out in favor of a three-level model of relations between historical reality and the texts on which it is based: (1) the past in and of itself (ontology); (2) the level of description (epistemology); and (3) the level of presentation/representation (aesthetics).<sup>20</sup> In light of these distinctions, the texts

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16 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 66.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 67.

19 E. M. Bruner, “Experience and its Expressions,” in *The Anthropology of Experience*, eds. V. W. Turner, E. M. Bruner (Urbana 1986).

20 See F. R. Ankersmit, “The Linguistic Turn: Literary Theory and Historical Theory,” in *Historical Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 57. See also E. Domańska, “Miejsce Franka Ankersmita w narratywistycznej filozofii historii,” which is the introduction to a collection of Ankersmit’s writings: *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie. Studia z teorii historiografii*, ed. E. Domańska (Kraków 2004), 14.

I analyze in this work are instances of “life that is voiced”; they are a record that demands an interpretation, placed on the level of presentation, which opens the path to experience.

I want to state emphatically that, as I write about limit experiences, what I have in mind are the various forms of their representation; what interests me is the record, the portrayal, the image, and not reality itself. In a word, what is important to me is not direct experience, but rather the mediated experience, “mimetic mediation,” which, “because it makes use of [...] stylistic-compositional-representational models,” produces a “scheme for the organization of experience.”<sup>21</sup>

At this point we must introduce a distinction between presentation and representation. Based on historiographic theory, Frank Ankersmit applies the idea of “historical representation”; he writes about:

[...] the so-called substitution theory of representation. According to this theory - and in agreement with the etymology of the word ‘representation’ - a representation essentially is a substitute or replacement of something else that is absent. Obviously, precisely because of the latter’s absence, we may be in need of the substitute’s ‘re-representing’ it.”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, to “represent” is to return something to the present, and the “represented” is that which is “not present.”<sup>23</sup> Michał Paweł Markowski points to the ambiguity of the concept of representation, which in the Polish language is manifested in the words *reprezentacja* and *przedstawienie*, which in practice are treated as synonyms, but which on the basis of philosophy cannot be treated as synonyms. *Reprezentacja* (representation) and *przedstawienie* (presentation) complement one another, but they are not the same. *Reprezentacja* is, on the one hand, a substitute (it appears instead of a thing) and:

[...] on the other hand every *reprezentacja* embodies [*uobecnia*] in some way that which it represents [...]. Which means that every representation is divided in half, it is a “substitute and indication simultaneously,” a non-depiction of that which is presented and a repeated depiction, through mediation and presentation. [...] Because *reprezentacja* is *re-presentatio*, the repeated depiction of a thing through the use of signs and symbols. In turn, as Heidegger taught us, *przed-stawienie* is *przed-się-stawienie* (*Vor-stellung*), the establishment of an object by the subject through mental representation - that is, the idea that is often translated as imagination.<sup>24</sup>

21 For more on “mimetic mediation,” see R. Nycz, “Tezy o mimetyczności,” in Nycz, *Tekstowy świat. Poststrukturalizm i wiedza o literaturze* (Warszawa 1993), 247–249.

22 See F. R. Ankersmit, “In Praise of Subjectivity,” in *Historical Representation*, 80.

23 F. Ankersmit, “Wprowadzenie do wydania polskiego,” trans. E. Domańska, *ibid.*, 31.

24 M. P. Markowski, *Pragnienie obecności. Filozofie reprezentacji od Platona do Kartezjusza* (Gdańsk 1999), 10–11.

We often have the feeling that we are not able to convey to others our deepest experiences (*doznanie*, that which we have “gone through”), because they are so individual and inimitable that they must remain in the sphere of the unspoken. Similarly, the word “experience” has often been used to define that which is experienced (survived) but which cannot be expressed, because it is inexpressible.<sup>25</sup> Modernity contributed to the decreased authority of experience; it turned out that experience was extremely subjective, and thus incommunicable and intransmissible. Modern experience forms and shapes reality, more than it reproduces or presents reality. Another significant feature of modern experience is its stratification: “Between that which is presented in the depiction and the object itself, inhuman reality, a gap opens up that is difficult for the intellect to bridge.”<sup>26</sup> This fundamental shift (or break), which represents a constitutive feature of the relationship between experience (*doświadczenie*) and presentation (*przedstawienie*), is revealed with particular clarity in reflections on the Holocaust and its representations. These reflections are situated in the space marked out, on the one hand, by mild theory about the crisis of representation and, on the other hand, by radical sounding formulas like “negative presentation,”<sup>27</sup> “forbidden representation,”<sup>28</sup> and the “impossibility of representation,”<sup>29</sup> and by the promotion of concepts as the aporia of meaning, a desert, silence.<sup>30</sup> Matters involving the representation of limit experiences and the conditions

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25 This points to Jay’s comment: “Although we may try to share or represent what we experience, the argument goes, only the subject really knows what he or she has experienced.” See Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 5-6.

26 For more on the crisis in traditional experience and its consequences, see R. Nycz, “Literatura nowoczesna wobec doświadczenia,” op. cit., 14-16.

27 Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?” *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Regis Durand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 71-82.

28 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (Fordham Univ. Press, 2005).

29 A. Easthope, “Holokaust i niemożność przedstawienia,” trans. M. Pietrzak-Merta, *Res Publica Nowa* 11 (1997).

30 For more on the issue of the (im-)possibility of representing the Holocaust, written in the broader context of philosophy, aesthetics, sociology, and history, see A. Ubertowska, “Popioły i dyskursy. Zagłada i etyczny wymiar reprezentacji (od Adorna do Lyotarda),” in her book *Świadectwo - trauma - głos. Literackie reprezentacje Holokaustu* (Kraków 2007). It is worth emphasizing that this author is not only thorough in his work, but also precise and clear when it comes to concepts that are often highly complicated, if not esoteric. Such an effort is particularly valuable.

under which it is possible to present them, along with the question of what is expressible and what is not, will be one of the fundamental themes of this book.

## Inspiration

The concept of the limit experience is laden with ambiguity. But I cannot find another term to define the basic subject of this book. In order to render it operational as much as possible, I will attempt to call upon those scholarly traditions that constitute the source of inspiration for my thinking about the limit experience. While some of them are close to me, I distance myself more or less from others. Below, I will sketch out the inspiration I have drawn from the ideas of Karl Jaspers, Bruno Bettelheim, Dominick LaCapra and Frank Ankersmit. They shine light on the understanding of the limit experience as proposed in this book.

Karl Jaspers drew a distinction between factual existence (*Dasein*) and “selfhood” (*Selbstsein*). Factual existence is everything that is realized in a human; it is the totality of factors contributing to human existence: biological, social, historical, cultural. “Selfhood,” on the other hand, is not something given, prepared or ready-made. It is a means of existence that can be, in a sense, peeled, thanks to reflective efforts, thanks to an individual’s activity as a values creating subject.<sup>31</sup> Every person stands in the face of limit situations, which do not “happen” like a natural catastrophe or an automobile accident. They are not an affliction or ailment of existence; rather, they are its essence. “Being in a situation” is one of the most prominent dimensions of human existence.

Jaspers described limit situations as those situations that do not change, but rather are a constant companion of our presence in the world. They are: (1) entanglement in a situation of some kind; (2) battle; (3) culpability; (4) suffering; (5) death.<sup>32</sup>

The situations mentioned here take on a limit character when a people assume an existential stance when facing them – that is, when they illuminate their existence by virtue of their experience of freedom, and in the process becomes themselves (*Selbstsein*). “We become ourselves,” as Jaspers wrote, “in that we enter limit situations with open eyes. They are perceptible as something real only through existence [...]. To experience a limit situation and to exist are one and the same thing.”<sup>33</sup>

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31 See R. Rudziński, *Jaspers* (Warszawa 1978), 73–77.

32 *Ibid.*, 106.

33 K. Jaspers, “Sytuacje graniczne,” in R. Rudziński, *op. cit.*, 189.

Death confronts us with the pain that comes with irretrievable loss; it unveils fear about the strangeness of the world and the inevitable destruction of what exists. But it also brings awareness of a more enduring reality, one that crosses beyond the transience of life. “That which maintains value in the face of death belongs to existence; that which is destroyed belongs only to the sphere of factuality.”<sup>34</sup> Death as a limit situation appears in the form of a question about this distinction. One can overcome fear of the end of life only through an “unconditional affirmation of existence, in which we do good for the sake of good, even if we know of no larger whole to which that good might belong – an order of salvation, reason, or history.”<sup>35</sup> The experience of death as a limit experience opens up the possibility of authentic existence, the expression of which is a “heroic stance, overcoming fear and death on the path to a voluntary engagement with the world, taking responsibility for the fact that we give testimony to humanity in this place and in these circumstances.”<sup>36</sup>

Bruno Bettelheim drew a clear distinction between the disasters that had previously been the causes of mass death (natural catastrophes, the plague, traditional wars) and twentieth-century cataclysms, which were prepared with premeditation by humans and brought in their wake suffering, destruction and death on what had been an unimaginable scale. The First World War had destroyed faith that civilizational progress could offer meaning to our life, solve the problems that stood in our path, and calm fears about death. Despite great scientific, technological and intellectual progress, humans became the victim of irrational forces of violence and destruction. The Second World War showed to what terrible degree humans were capable of destroying and killing. Auschwitz was the realization of a perfected system for organized cruelty. Hiroshima became the symbol of the destructive power of science. All of these experiences caused disintegration in the forms of collective human existence, and they had a devastating influence on the life of an individual, both emotionally and physically.

Human beings were, as it were, tossed into an “extreme situation,” which represented for them an extreme threat, one over which they had no influence at all. What’s more, they were in no position to defend themselves against it or to tame it, because old models of adaptation, strategies for survival, and defense mechanisms, were no longer applicable. They were simply inadequate. “Extreme experiences” are the key experiences of our life. They expose the destructive

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34 R. Rudziński, *op. cit.*, 108.

35 *Ibid.*, 109.

36 *Ibid.*

power of progress and lead to a disintegration of personality; to the destruction of faith in the meaning of life; to paralysis in the elaborate ways people had been able to calm fears about death; and – in the end – to questioning the extent to which humans were embedded in culture and in the world of values.<sup>37</sup>

As early as 1943, in an article entitled “Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations,” Bruno Bettelheim wrote about the concept of the “extreme situation.” It was a psychological study of the behavior of prisoners in concentration camps, written on the basis of his own experiences. After Germany’s Anschluss with Austria, Bettelheim had been deported to Dachau, along with other Austrian Jews, and then to Buchenwald. In April 1939, he was freed and he emigrated to the United States. This article, published in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 38 (October 1943) has been reprinted many times and brought Bettelheim fame as a keen analyst of the human condition under the extreme oppression of the concentration camp.<sup>38</sup>

Dominick LaCapra has stated that scholars who examine the twentieth century – the century of the two totalitarianisms, of two world wars, of incessant local and regional conflicts, of the Holocaust – must place at the center of their investigations the concept of trauma. In this context, he writes about the Holocaust as a “limit event,” a “limit situation,” and a “limit experience.” This “limit” phenomenon manifests itself in such events as those listed above and, more generally, in practices that contain within themselves the potential for powerful, overwhelming and unprecedented aggression and violence, which – in effect – means aradical disruption of what had been the foundations of civilized order, the destruction of the values on which the human community depended.<sup>39</sup> LaCapra applies the mechanisms of mourning and melancholy (drawn from Freud) to traumatic limit experiences. Sinking into melancholy represents the unending process of “working through” trauma in the present, the inability to cut oneself off from that trauma and to avoid its destructive powers. Mourning is

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37 For more on the concept of “extreme situations,” see B. Bettelheim, “The Ultimate Limit,” in *Surviving and other Essays* (New York 1979).

38 Bettelheim’s reflections on the concentration camps, the Holocaust, and totalitarian violence are contained in his book *Surviving and Other Essays*.

39 D. LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca, New York 1998); LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore 2001); LaCapra, “Approaching Limit Events. Siting Agamben,” in *Giorgio Agamben. Sovereignty and Life*, eds. M. Calarco, S. DeCardi (Stanford 2007). See also S. Gigliotti, “Unspeakable Pasts as Limit Events: The Holocaust, Genocide, and the Stolen Generations,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 49 no. 2 (June 2003).

based on the “acting out” of trauma, leaving it in the past, and returning to life, which becomes richer through a kind of new self-knowledge.<sup>40</sup>

LaCapra’s comments on the forms by which limit experiences are represented is essential for my work; they point to the irreducible tension between the expressible and the inexpressible. The claim – which one can find, for example, in Lyotard’s works – that traumatic limit experiences are not susceptible to representation that they carry within themselves a kind of excess that eludes any kind of representation, gives rise to two kinds of danger. First, a kind of fixation on the backdrop of non-representation can divert attention away from what actually can be represented and reconstructed and should be expressed as accurately and precisely as possible. Second, it can lead to excessive aestheticization of limit experiences, to their being positioned in the realm of the sublime, whether that be secular or (sacralized) religious.<sup>41</sup> The sublimation or sanctification of limit experiences can be a trap; they can lead to limit experiences being obscured by abstract speculation or by the stylistics of pathos. In *Representing the Holocaust*, LaCapra wrote about the radical de-sublimation that came with the Holocaust, which eliminated the possibility that some kind of higher meaning could survive, because there emerges from the Holocaust no new project for metaphysical, aesthetic or theological order. The Holocaust left space only for “a negative sublime in the form of unheard-of, traumatizing transgression that is presumed to be unrepresentable and to be met only with silence.”<sup>42</sup> But LaCapra debates with Lyotard by claiming, among other things, that his concept of the sublime as a manifestation of non-representation prevents a nuanced study of various modalities and possibilities of representation. Lyotard’s radical theoretical posture has also raised doubts in LaCapra’s mind. Insufficient reflection on the relationship between history and theory leads to Lyotard “sacrificing” history to philosophical discourse.<sup>43</sup>

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40 See D. LaCapra, “Acting-Out and Working-Through,” in LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust. History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, London 1996). Significantly, as one of the two epigraphs for his book, LaCapra chose a passage from Freud’s 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia.”

41 See D. LaCapra, “Holocaust Testimonies: Attending to the Victim’s Voice,” in LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, op. cit., 92-93.

42 D. LaCapra, “The Return of the Historically Repressed,” in LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*, op. cit., 172.

43 D. LaCapra, “Historicizing the Holocaust,” in LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*, op. cit., 96-99.

Frank Ankersmit has turned the categories of trauma and the sublime into one of the foundations of his concept for historical experience. The gap between the past and the present is best described by the Freudian term “uncanny.” Ankersmit explained: “What most upsets us about the ‘uncanny’ is that which was once very close and highly familiar to us, but which is simultaneously strange and foreign. Precisely for this reason, the dead are ‘uncanny.’”<sup>44</sup> Historical experience expresses our relationship to the past and is located in a space marked both by an awareness that the past has been lost and by a desire to retrieve that past. Two opposing vectors intersect with one another, creating a tension that comes from the collision of suffering (the loss of the past) and pleasure (a desire to retrieve the past). This tension between suffering and pleasure is the source of the sublime.<sup>45</sup> Referring to Edmund Burke’s treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Ankersmit argues that “the sublime calls forth in us both pain and pleasure, joy and terror, and along with that an entire range of conflicting feelings.”<sup>46</sup> For Ankersmit, the paradigm of historical experience is the experience of trauma and the experience of the sublime. “The sublimity of historical experience originates from this paradoxical union of the feelings of loss and love, that is, of the combination of pain and pleasure in how we relate to the past.”<sup>47</sup>

Traumatic experiences open us up to research into the limits of representation. Ankersmit wrote:

An exploration of these limits thus urges us to consider “testimony” and what we ordinarily associate with that word; for does not testimony give us a representation of a person’s deepest and most significant experiences? And should we not agree that to the extent that the experience of the Holocaust can be represented in language, that language must take the form of testimony?<sup>48</sup>

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44 F. Ankersmit, “Wprowadzenie do wydania polskiego,” in Ankersmit, *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie*, op. cit., 45.

45 See E. Domańska, “Miejsce Franka Ankersmita w narratywistycznej filozofii historii,” op. cit., 19. For a monograph on the sublime, see J. Pluciennik, *Retoryka wzniosłości w dziele literackim* (Kraków 2000).

46 F. Ankersmit, “Wprowadzenie do wydania polskiego,” in Ankersmit, *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie*, op. cit., 45.

47 F. R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 9

48 “The Postmodernist ‘Privatization’ of the Past,” [chapter 5] in F. R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 162–163.

Georges Bataille is not exactly my intellectual patron, though I treat certain aspects of his writings as inspiring interpretational tropes. Bataille posed questions that are beyond the horizon of my reflections here, above all questions about experiences without an object. His questioning of the existence of a coherent experiential object led him to oppose the identification of experience with *Erlebnis*, which he recognized as problematic given its emphasis on experiential immediacy and the present moment.<sup>49</sup> *Erlebnis* as understood and used by Dilthey and Gadamer is decidedly closer to my way of thinking. In any case, the concept of the “inner experience” alone does not work in harmony with the many studies featured in this book; at the beginning of his work, Bataille wrote: “By *inner experience*, I understand what one usually calls *mystical experience*: states of ecstasy, of ravishment, at least of mediated emotion.”<sup>50</sup>

But as the author of *L'Erotisme*, Bataille assists me in my thoughts on the death experience; on the fundamental ambivalence between fear and desire, attraction and repulsion; on the dialectics of limits and transgression. As one commentator on Bataille's thinking put it:

Acknowledging the finitude of others is a quintessential community-inducing limit-experience in several senses. [...] Experiencing the death of the alter, even from the “outside,” compels us to experience the alterity within ourselves.<sup>51</sup>

In another place, that same commentator wrote: “Bataille knew full well that the limit of experience was met only in a death that was both impossible to incorporate into life and also its most intense, ecstatic and profound moment.”<sup>52</sup>

It seems that the simplest and yet most capacious (and thus most useful for me) formula is the one put together by Jan Strzelecki. Describing limit experiences, he wrote that they mark “existence in the sphere of a human fate's final experiences, as if on the border of experiences that fall to people as members of a species.”<sup>53</sup> Following Strzelecki's thinking, one could say that we witness a limit experience at that point when a person is capable of enduring no more, but they must endure more – and they do.

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49 See Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 375.

50 Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 9.

51 Martin Jay, “The Limits of Limit-Experience: Bataille and Foucault,” *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 2 (1995), 167.

52 Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 373.

53 J. Strzelecki, “Próby świadectwa,” in *Kontynuacje* (2) (Warszawa 1974), 11.

By way of summary, one can thus say that, in this book, I consider limit experiences to be, above all, those experiences that contain within themselves trauma, and that are connected with the macabre and horror. They accompany the great catastrophes of the twentieth century that were the Second World War and the Holocaust. When speaking of the macabre, what I have in mind are such definitions as we find in contemporary dictionaries of the Polish language:<sup>54</sup> “*coś strasznego, przerażającego, wzbudzającego grozę; okropność, koszmar*” (something terrible, frightening; something that causes terror; horror, a nightmare). But for me it is above all about representations of death and corpses. The point of reference for the macabre, understood in this narrow sense, is of course the tradition of the *danse macabre* and the image of the decaying corpse – the *transi*.<sup>55</sup> Death and the corpse are thus the nucleus of the macabre, which I regard as one expression of the limit experience.

I situate limit experiences both in the sphere of individual experiences (in the sense of “*doznanie*,” e.g. macabre deformations of the faces of soldiers from the First World War caused by injuries sustained on the front, and their influence on the destruction of subjectivity) and in the sphere of collective, social experiences (e.g. the bombing of cities and their influence on inhabitants’ perception of urban space). I would like to point out some common features that characterize the different types of border experiences considered in this book, including feelings of ambivalence toward the source of an experience (e.g. an encounter with a corpse: attraction and repulsion; bombardment: fascination and horror). Ambivalence toward the limit experience lends it a structural resemblance to an experience of the sacred, which Rudolf Otto called *numinosum* and Gerard van der Leeuw called power.<sup>56</sup> Holiness thus conceived is experienced as menacing and fascinating at the same time.

The limit experience also contains within itself an element of illumination. Trauma is not just devastating, but also revealing. Having passed through a limit experience, we are no longer what we were before. Such a radical experience

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54 For example as edited by M. Szymczak (Warszawa 1984) or S. Dubisz (Warszawa 2003).

55 For the etymology and meaning of the word macabre in the context of the human corpse, see Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death over the Last One Thousand Years*, trans. Helen Weaver (Vintage, 2008); Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of the Western Guilt Culture, 13th - 18th Centuries*, trans. Eric Nicholson (Palgrave Macmillan, 1990).

56 See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford University Press, 1936); Gerardus Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. Ninian Smart and John Evan Turner (Princeton University Press, 2014).

transforms us; it gives a person bitter knowledge about the world and about ourselves (as it does about those who survive their own death, who were rescued from execution, who crawled out of a mass grave). In this sense, a limit experience is a gift, an opening, a revelation.<sup>57</sup>

## Subject and Structure

The subject of this book is the various forms by which limit experiences – which emerged in a particular way in the twentieth century – are represented.

With the First World War came the trench experience – that is, life on the front lines in a state of unending threat, under atrocious conditions, among the massacred bodies of friends and enemies, face to face with death, shoulder to shoulder with corpses.<sup>58</sup> These war experiences depicted the full weight of the psychological trauma that marked the lives of so many people, individually and collectively, after the war. One can treat my reflections on the historical, clinical and cultural dimensions of trauma as a desire to confront the limit experience, as an attempt to understand, and elaborate on, the mechanisms for coping with life in a world of violence and chaos.<sup>59</sup>

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57 See B Skarga, op. cit., 128-129. Jay wrote: “[...] something must be altered, something new must happen, to make the term meaningful.” See Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 7.

58 For more on the trench experience, see “The Troglodyte World” in Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2000); D. Winter, “Trench Life” and “The Strain of Trench Warfare,” in Winter, *Death’s Men. Soldiers of the Great War* (London 1978); Modris Eksteins, “Rites of War,” in his *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989). For more on the body in autobiographical accounts from the First World War, on the body subjected to the violence of war and oppression, the body wounded, dismembered and dead, see T. Trudi, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester, New York 1998).

59 The mental disorders appearing in soldiers who fought on the front during World War I were attributed mistakenly to brain damage and diagnosed as shell shock. Medical research carried out since the end of the nineteenth century on posttraumatic disorders, including Freud’s study of the phenomenon of psychological trauma, led to the emergence of a new field of study about the effects of particularly intense and prolonged stress on the human psyche, and to the emergence in 1980 of a new disease classification tied to the name posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) See M. Lis-Turlejska, *Stres traumatyczny. Występowanie, następstwa, terapia* (Warszawa 2002). For more on the matter of trauma in the First World War, as analyzed from the perspective of the history of medicine, see the study “Shock, Trauma, and Psychiatry in the First World War,” which is part four of the work *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and*

The Second World War put an end to the division (already blurred during the Great War) between the war front and the home front, between soldiers and civilians. Military actions were also directed at civilian populations, and the area bombing, or carpet bombing, of cities caused “modern” destruction on a scale that had never been seen before. This war opened the way for the Holocaust: every Jew, without exception, was the target of mass extermination that was unprecedented in history. One often locates the exceptional nature of the Holocaust in the fact that the intention was to destroy the entire population of European Jews, and that it was carried out using specific methods based on bureaucratic procedures and technological solutions.<sup>60</sup> But the question remains: was the Holocaust a modern creation, or was it – on the contrary – a manifestation of barbarism, an irrational frenzy, a matter of civilizational regression?

The concept of the Holocaust’s “modernity” has many advocates, from Hannah Arendt<sup>61</sup> to Zygmunt Bauman.<sup>62</sup> In their view, what we are dealing with here is an “enlightened” or “gardener’s” vision of the world involving the implementation of a radical plan to transform society. If one regards society as a garden, then the process of cleansing through violence, the reconstruction of the social fabric, is not the murder of people, but the pulling of weeds. It is not destruction, but creation. We are dealing with absolute power that is capable of monopolizing all means for the purpose of committing genocide. We are dealing with the planned actions of a state administrative apparatus, with the application of bureaucratized procedures for the organization of murder, with industrial methods for mass murder and the utilization of corpses. All of which leads to a functional division of labor, to the replacement of moral responsibility with administrative responsibility. Finally, we are dealing with a kind of lack of spontaneity, with a murderous routine, with the banality of evil.

Those who understand the Holocaust as a terrible error of history, an aberration, a disturbance in the normal course of history, a retreat into the abyss

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*Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930 (Cambridge Studies in the History of Medicine)*, eds. M. S. Micale, P. Lerner (New York 2001). For a monograph based on analyses of testimonies from both world wars and local conflicts (Vietnam, the war in the Balkans), see W. Holden, *Shell Shock* (London 1998).

60 The question of exceptionality is not just a fundamental scholarly matter; it also forms one of the main aspects of the Holocaust discourse. For more on the Holocaust and exceptionality, see Alan Milchman, Alan Rosenberg, *Experiments in Thinking the Holocaust* (Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2006).

61 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Viking, 1963).

62 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cornell University Press, 1989).

of barbarism, include the German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf, who called the Germans a “defective nation” not prepared to hold up the standards of democracy and progress.

For Jürgen Habermas, Nazism was a consequence of the German inability to maintain a balance between universalist and particularist elements in the creation of a national identity. The particularism is an immanent feature of German nationalism, which boils down to the idea of cultural and ethnic exceptionalism. These qualities disallowed Germany from becoming a modern nation and from creating a modern state, a fact that led to Auschwitz.<sup>63</sup>

Genocide creates a pre-modern “ecstatic community” of perpetrators, who perform their transgression through participation in mass murder. Saul Friedlander described the orgiastic dimension of the experience of the perpetrators of genocide. He wrote about the world of “strangeness or uncanniness,” and he introduced the term “*Rausch*” (ecstasy, intoxication) to describe this particular condition.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the Holocaust was not a passionless exercise, not a coldly “modern” gardening project, but rather an act of “barbaric” frenzy.<sup>65</sup>

This book is divided into two parts. The first part examines the experience of cities and urban spaces in the face of massive attacks from the air. The second part deals above all with the experience of the body as an object of conventional military violence, and as an object of unprecedented extermination. The first emerges from an analysis of individual attitudes in order to reach the layer of social consciousness and collective memory. The second concentrates on the individual whose involvement represents a limit experience of a different kind.

Part I of the book is devoted to the phenomenon of a city subjected to oppression, violence and decomposition of many kinds, and finally to destruction. In the chapter entitled “Topography and Existence,” I address, on the one hand,

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63 For more on the views of Dahrendorf and Habermas, see M. Fleming, “Genocide and the Body Politic in the Time of Modernity,” in *The Specter of Genocide. Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, eds. R. Gellately and B. Kieman (New York 2003), 98–99.

64 See S. Friedlander, “The ‘Final Solution’: On the Unease in Historical Interpretation,” in Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington 1993).

65 See D. Stone, “Genocide as Transgression,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 1, no. 7 (2004), 48–49. For more on the tension between modernity and “barbarism” in the context of acts of mass violence, genocide and the wars of the twentieth century, see Wolfgang Sofsky, *Violence: Terrorism, Genocide, War* (Granta, 2003). Sofsky wrote, among other things, that “**civilization, barbarism and the modern world might be interlinked in their own peculiar way**” (p. 63).

the “experience of topography” (that is, the reconstruction of the image of a city as preserved in texts) and, on the other hand, the “topography of experience” (that is, the peculiar use of the language of urban space to express experiences of war and occupation). On the basis of the defense of Warsaw in September 1939, I write about two ways of coping with extreme situations, which one might well characterize as both individual and collective catastrophes; about two strategies to reconcile the situation that are derived from different areas of tradition and that invoke different spheres of cognition, emotion and intellect. On the basis of the Warsaw Ghetto, I write about the experience of a space that was excluded, reviled and stigmatized; the ghetto itself is for me a metaphorical formula for a degraded and tormented existence. In the chapter entitled “Bombardment,” I depict – from the points of view of the victims and the perpetrators – the moment of total and rapid destruction of cities as a result of mass bombing, and I present various strategies for remembering events of this kind.

Part II of the book examines the human being experiencing the destruction of his own body, suffering, fear, dying, and finally – the dead body. I contemplate various images and motifs drawn from selected writings and photography embedded in the context of twentieth-century experiences with the horrific, traumatic and macabre. These experiences are situated somewhere between the expressible and the inexpressible. In the chapter entitled “*Looks*”<sup>66</sup> I analyze photographs. Based on photographs of facial injuries sustained by soldiers in the First World War, I depict ways of representing (in text and images) the deformation of the human appearance. I move from images of the tormented body to photos of people (being conscripted into the military) unaware of the approaching torment. My reflections on images tied to the Holocaust contain the motif of people unaware of the inevitable catastrophe, the obscured literalness of the macabre, and finally damaged photographs, which can be interpreted as a metonym for the Holocaust. In this chapter, a *look* is understood both as a topic/subject – a certain essential detail of presented reality, preserved in photos, that can be captured, isolated and described – and as a description of a certain investigatory attitude, a way of comprehending the object of reflection: an attentive gaze at the details. Following the track of *looks* preserved in photographs,

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66 Translator’s note: In the original Polish text, this chapter title is “Spojrzzenia,” the plural of “spojrzzenie,” which can be translated as “gaze,” “glance,” and – what I regard as most appropriate here – “look.” Because the word “look” (or “looks”) fits awkwardly in some English-language sentences where “spojrzzenie” does not in Polish-language sentences, I will hereafter italicize *look* and *looks*.

I attempt to capture the landscape of the limit experience: the area of transition from life to death. In the chapter entitled “Encounters with a Corpse,” I move through a series of macabre subjects in an analysis of various ways of recording confrontations with the dead body: from a history of the postmortem and the cultural meanings attributed to the autopsy, through grotesque and ennobling representations of the macabre, to the image of the degraded corpse and violations of funeral ceremonies during the Holocaust. A kind of epilogue to this journey contains reflections on the experiences of those who were able to survive an execution, and those who escaped – literally – a mass grave.

## Sources and Research Method

I base my work on two fundamental types of sources: written records and images (above all photographs). I treat both types as a text that is subject to interpretation. I make use of the term “text” in the broad sense of the word, one that goes beyond the scope of linguistics and crystalizes in the concept of “cultural text,” in every sequence of signs and symbols in a given system, ordered according to its own rules.<sup>67</sup> Both the word and the photographic image are, for me, a record of experience, and not just a “collection” of facts or a depository of truth.<sup>68</sup> The distinct nature of photographic and linguistic records determines the shape of the evidence itself, as well as the possibilities for how that evidence can be “read.” In my analysis of various forms of record, I have had to maneuver between two types of relations: on the one hand, the word *versus* the image (photograph), and on the other hand, textualization *versus* visualization.

Regarding written texts, I rely on source material that is personal, autobiographical in nature. The concept of a personal document was developed from within humanistic sociology, and it was Florian Znaniecki who introduced the concept to the social sciences. Znaniecki explored the autobiography as valuable sociological material in and of itself, and in so doing created the so-called “biographical documents method.” The concept of the personal document was

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67 This way of understanding text originated with scholars of culture and semiotics from the Tartu–Moscow School. For more, see S. Żółkiewski, *Teksty kultury: studia* (Warszawa 1988); T. Dobrzyńska, “Tekst jako przedmiot badań różnych dyscyplin naukowych,” in *Tekst. Próba syntezy* (Warszawa 1993), 42.

68 “The belief that leads to the categorical distinction between sources and historical narrative and the treatment of sources as a depository of truth, I call this a myth about historical sources.” J. Topolski, *Jak się pisze i rozumie historię. Tajemnice narracji historycznej* (Warszawa 1996), 337.

carried over to the study of literature by Roman Zimand, who invented “personal document literature” as a concept. This concept encompassed a wide range of written autobiographical material – personal accounts, diaries, journals, and letters – which create an internally differentiated constellation of texts that consist of an area with effaced and elusive borders.<sup>69</sup> Such texts are an expression of a position that – simply put – can be described through a bipolar schema. On one side there would be the position of the witness, who provides his account of the world, the domain of his personal experiences; and on the other side the position of someone who offers up an intimate confession, who writes not so much about the reality around him, but rather about himself.<sup>70</sup> The texts that I analyze are dominated by the position of the witness.

I make use of sources differently than do scholars who strongly emphasize the obligations to “describe the facts.” In his work *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* (published in 1824) Leopold von Ranke put forward his famous postulate: to write “how it really was” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).<sup>71</sup> According to this concept, the historian’s task is to present the facts objectively, which requires that sources be examined carefully, and that they be contrasted with other sources for the sake of verification. Ranke’s model includes an emphasis on “explanation” (as opposed to “understanding”). Though I respect this approach, I have set other goals for my investigation. In the sources, I am looking for not just knowledge of the facts, but rather a record of a limit experience that can be revealed and interpreted. I am far from advocating the “naïve” treatment of sources as a transparent medium, one that gives us direct access to knowledge of the experience itself or knowledge of some unmediated reality. Nonetheless, I am opposed to breaking experience from its empirical foundation, to moving within the realm of discourse entirely “detached” from reality.<sup>72</sup> The representations of limit experiences that I analyze here are founded on source material that adheres as closely as possible to the moment of experience itself.<sup>73</sup>

69 See R. Zimand, *Diarysta Stefan Ż.* (Wrocław 1990).

70 See M. Czermińska, *Autobiograficzny trójkąt. Świadectwo, wyznaczenie, wyzwanie* (Kraków 2000).

71 See J. Topolski, op. cit., 23-26.

72 For more on the “displacement” of the modern experience, which is “detached” from reality, loses its cohesion and cognitive neutrality, which leads in turn to the autonomy of the representation from the presented (experience), of the medium toward the object, see R. Nycz, *Literatura nowoczesna wobec doświadczenia*, op. cit., 15-16.

73 For more on research methodologies applied to autobiographical source materials and the Holocaust, see my article “Literatura dokumentu osobistego jako źródło do badań nad zagładą Żydów. (Rekoncesans metodologiczny),” *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i materiały*

One could characterize my scholarly approach as one that involves a certain methodological eclecticism. I would count hermeneutics as an important source of inspiration (above all Gadamer's version). It gives me a kind of "tuning" (as with a piano), provides me a path to understanding, to undertake understanding. Methods used in the field of literary anthropology to cultivate reflections, along with cultural theories of literature, are also important in my approach.<sup>74</sup> An interest in photography has led me toward those areas of the humanities that are called "visual sociology,"<sup>75</sup> "visual anthropology,"<sup>76</sup> or the anthropology of the image.<sup>77</sup>

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This book is the product of many years of meetings and conversations (from which I drew energy to work), suggestions, comments, commentary, and polemic impulses. I want to thank the students at the Instytut Kultury Polskiej at the University of Warsaw, with whom, during classes and seminars, I discussed many of the issues raised in this book, and I want to thank my friends from the Pracownia Poetyki Teoretycznej at the Instytut Badań Literackich (IBL) Polskiej Akademii Nauk (PAN) for their inspiring discussions and sometimes intense debates. I extend a word of heartfelt thanks to Professor Alina Brodzka-Wald for our valuable "nighttime talks." Thanks also to my friend, Professor Aleksander Nawarecki, for his thorough reading of the manuscript, his pointed comments, and valued additions. I would like to thank prof. Ewa Domańska for being ever

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- 1 (2005). For more on my own method of reading the literature of the personal document and the Holocaust, see *Tekst wobec Zagłady* (chapter "Poszukiwanie formuły").
- 74 See R. Nycz, "Kulturowa natura. Kilka uwag o przedmiocie poznania literackiego," *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2001); Nycz, "0 przedmiocie studiów literackich. dziś," *Teksty Drugie* 1–2 (2005); see also *Narracja i tożsamość*: vol. 1: *Narracje w kulturze*: vol. 2: *Antropologiczne problemy literatury*, eds. W. Bolecki, R. Nycz (Warszawa 2004); *Kulturowa teoria literatury, Główne pojęcia i problemy*, eds. M. P. Markowski, R. Nycz (Kraków 2006).
- 75 See P. Sztompka, *Socjologia wizualna. Fotografia jako metoda badawcza* (Warszawa 2006).
- 76 See S. Sikora, *Fotografia. Między dokumentem a symbolem* (Izabelin 2004). Sikora refers to issues of *Konteksty* devoted to visual anthropology (1992, no. 3-4; 1997, no. 3-4). See also *Film i audiowizualność w kulturze. Zagadnienia i wybór tekstów*. Część I: *Audiowizualność w kulturze: wprowadzenie*. Część II: *Film w kulturze*, ed. S. Kuśmierczyk (Warszawa 2002).
- 77 See K. Olechnicki, *Antropologia obrazu. Fotografia jako metoda, przedmiot i medium nauk społecznych* (Warszawa 2003).

prepared to assist and for her spiritual support. And I thank my invaluable wife for her patience and understanding.

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# Part I

