1 Topography and Existence

There are events that break the life of an individual in a single moment. An understanding of the depth of the crisis comes with time, early for some, later for others. An awareness grows that things will never again be like they were. The participation of someone who has survived such a situation represents a kind of transition experience: the feeling that we find ourselves on the border, in between. I am not speaking here of rites of passage, which – according to the classic notion put forward by Arnold van Gennep in his book *Les rites de passage* (1909) – affect all areas of human life and express, in a symbolic way, the critical moments in which change emerges (births, initiations, marriage ceremonies, motherhood and fatherhood, death).  

Rather, I am talking about events that are not subject to such strict ritualization, and that strike a person more or less unexpectedly such that he has no time to prepare for the coming event. And what interests me above all are the ways that people cope with these events; how they respond to them; what levels of tradition and culture, and what spheres of emotion and intellect, people reach for in order to give expression to such events.

The city, as a creation of the human collective, is a cultural form and thus, in its own way, a significant structure. One can therefore conceive the city as a text that generates its own kind of discourse, one that can be read and interpreted.

The object of my reflections is – so to speak – the recorded city, by which I mean the


79 R. E. Park, a representative of the “Chicago school” in sociology, wrote in 1916: “The city is […] a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with the tradition. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it.” See Mark Hutter, *Experiencing Cities* (Routledge, 2016), 90. See also M. S. Szczepański, “Z historii socjologii miasta i procesów urbanizacji. Ekologia klasyczna i konwencjonalne teorie urbanizacji,” in *Problemy socjologii miasta*, ed. J. Wódz (Katowice 1984), 16. For more on the city as a statement or the expressions of a city in the topological semiotic context, see A. J. Greimas, “Ku semiotyce topologicznej,” in E. Leach, A. J. Greimas, *Rytuał i narracja*, trans. M. Buchowski, A. Grzegorczyk, E. Umińska-Plisenko (Warszawa 1989); for an analysis of the semiotic city from the perspective of sociology, see B. Jałowicki, “Proces waloryzacji przestrzeni miejskiej,” in *Przestrzeń i społeczeństwo. Z badań ekologii społecznej*, ed. Z. Pióro (Warszawa 1982); see also *Pisanie miasta - czytanie miasta*, ed. A. Zeidler-Janiszewska (Poznań 1997).
various ways in which the experiences of a city have been preserved in written texts. I thus do not so much read texts of the city, but read texts about the city; indeed, not just about the city where one experiences something, about urban scenery, but rather (also) about the urban as a category of human community in the social, cultural and existential sense. About a kind of “urbanized” form of experience, about a “topographical” form of expression.

This chapter focuses on the ways of recording the various stages of the degradation and destruction of urban space, in this case Warsaw: From the September siege of 1939, through the city divided by the ghetto wall, to an attempt to describe the empty “space-after-the-ghetto.”

**Romantic Heroization**

Diarists at the time perceived the very moment the war broke out in a kind of dual fashion. War was expected, but when it became fact, it was surprising. It seems like this reaction was almost universal. On 1 September, Halina Regulska, wife of the future Head Commandant of the Citizens’ Guard during the defense of Warsaw, noted: “The news, though expected, threw us off balance.”

Ludwik Landau wrote the following about the first day of the war: “Today we had the first air raid on Warsaw, which – despite everything – was so unexpected that many people took it as an attempt to test the efficiency of the anti-aircraft defense.”

The entry dated 1 September 1939 that begins the diary of Waclaw Lipiński reads: “So, word became deed … War! War, as I predicted months ago – unexpectedly, suddenly, without notice.” Such evangelical wording emphasizes not only the significance of the event, but also the moment in which expectations were fulfilled. Something thus happened that we were waiting for, that we indeed expected, but – paradoxically – came “unexpectedly and suddenly.” A collision of anticipation and surprise.

An entry in the diary of poet Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz placed the moment war broke out into the context trivial everyday existence (“Podkowa was bombed, 

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83 Translator’s note: Podkowa Leśna was (and is) an affluent suburb of Warsaw about 20 kilometers southwest of the Polish capital.
while the girls were out picking mushrooms and we couldn’t call them in”) and into a metaphysical perspective:

Yesterday, after the bombing had stopped and after some idiotic talks, the Radio broadcast Debussy’s “Iberia.” In the chaos created by man, this clear and classical music seemed to me to be a game of pure numbers, a divine indication of the order of the totality of numbers. The possibility to think abstractly, the possibility to break from the horror of fractions through whole numbers, art, seems to me to be the possibility for salvation. And once again, even now, when all is falling apart: salvation is only in art!  

With war, ripping at the fabric of everyday life, man is faced with the ultimate danger. Iwaszkiewicz detected something more: as if in the bright light of an epiphany, the fundamental principle governing reality, both human and divine, was unfolding before him. Here we see the collision of order and chaos, of that which is constant and eternal with that which is fleeting and transient; the greatness of art set against elemental disaster. One could interpret this as testimony to an experience of something that one might call a limit event.

Let us juxtapose two visions of Warsaw during the September siege of 1939. Both were preserved as they happened, one during the bombardment, the other just after the Germans entered the city. The first one was delineated by Warsaw mayor (Poles use the term “president”) Stefan Starzyński during his famous radio addresses and, by way of a climax, in his last speech on 23 September 1939, two days before the heaviest bombing and five days before capitulation, during which he uttered the famous lines: “I wanted Warsaw to be great …” and “Warsaw, defending the honor of Poland, is today at the highest point of its greatness.” The second one was recorded by writer Karol Irzykowski under the date 3 October 1939, when the picture of Warsaw’s destruction had become entirely clear and Adolf Hitler was about to lead a victory parade along the city’s Aleje Ujazdowskie. In this diary entry, Irzykowski cited the opinion circulating through Warsaw “that Starzyński’s action – his refusal to surrender the city – was ‘criminal,’” and he added for himself that “Today W[arsaw] is the most wonderful demolished city in Europe, […] the president could show it to tourists for money.”

85 Quote from Archiwum Prezydenta Warszawy Stefana Starzyńskiego, ed. and intro. by M. M. Drozdowski (Warszawa 2004), 294.
The testimonies of Starzyński and Irzykowski are representative of the attitudes I want to describe. They grow out of distinct intellectual and cultural traditions, out of different models of patriotism; they also make use of polar opposed rhetorical styles. They display examples of different ways of coping with an event which was predictable and historically familiar (the outbreak of war), but which very quickly slipped – so to speak – out of mental and emotional control. The experience of the uneven battle between the Germans and the Poles, and of defeat, has been domesticated in Polish history. But the September siege, the scale of the destruction and the number of victims, the bitterness that came with dashed hopes, had brought Poland to an apogee. At least that is how it seemed at the time. The records analyzed here are an effect of a confrontation with these experiences. Each in a different dimension. It is difficult to find a more dramatic example of the collision of martyrological pathos and romantic frenzy (on the one hand) and bitter irony (on the other hand) undermining the heroic myth.

Stefan Starzyński, the mayor of Warsaw and a prominent representative of the Sanacja regime, had earned himself the sympathies of Varsovians before the war, but the events of September 1939 brought him fame and glory as the leader of the nation, which allowed him entry into the pantheon of heroes and warriors for freedom. The legend of Starzyński, born during the siege of Warsaw, is alive still today. Great poets – Jan Lechoń, Antoni Słonimski – wrote verse about him, as did such lesser known poets as Ryszard Kiersnowski. In his account of the battle of Warsaw, written in a prison camp, Colonel Stanisław Rola-Arciszewski, deputy chief of staff of the “Warsaw” army under the command of General Juliusz Rómmel, had no doubt that Starzyński was “a man whom Warsaw owed a monument ‘aere perennius’.” But the two monuments erected in his name after

87 Translator’s note: The Sanacja regime emerged from Józef Piłsudski’s May Coup of 1926. Increasingly authoritarian and nationalistic, it governed Poland throughout the 1930s until the German occupation of Poland in 1939.
the war hardly fit into this category. The figure of the mayor battling for the city was invoked at one of the key moments in postwar Polish history by one of its greatest moral authorities. During the dedication of a memorial plate to Stefan Starzyński in St. John’s Archcathedral in Warsaw, placed alongside epitaphs to Marshal of the Four-Year Sejm Stanisław Małachowski and to Polish Premier Wincenty Witos,\(^{91}\) the Primate of Poland Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński elevated Starzyński to the level occupied by other Polish national heroes. They all cry out:

The need for the “sword of the spirit and the action of steel” to mobilize the strength of a nation who wants to live. [...] To this chorus of the ages, which resounds with mighty organs throughout this cathedral, we add one voice – the heroic defender of the Capital, president [mayor] Stefan Starzyński. May the call go out to everyone who passes this way: “Clamate lapides de patrie - Warsaw, oh Warsaw”\(^{92}\)

Starzyński’s place in the national pantheon was ensured by his actions during the siege: his decision to remain in Warsaw in defiance of the disorderly evacuation of the government and state administration; his self-control in avoiding panic; the perfect organization of the civil defense of Warsaw; and above all his personal courage and boundless dedication. But Starzyński’s image would not have persisted in such a form down to the present day had it not been for radio. His permanent glory and fame was founded on the speeches he broadcast every day through what would seem like an impermanent medium.

Zygmunt Zaremba – one of the leaders of the Polish Socialist Party at the time, a co-organizer of the Workers’ Battalions for the defense of Warsaw, a

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\(^{90}\) Both Warsaw monuments could easily compete for the blue ribbon in the “Greatest Mistakes in Sculpture” contest. The first monument, designed by L. Kraskowska-Nitschowa and unveiled on 16 January 1981, is hidden in the trees of the Saxon Garden in Warsaw, and presents a kind of dwarf figure on a pedestal. The second is a complete catastrophe. Located near the Błękitny Wieżowiec tram stop at Plac Bankowy, it presents a kind of monstrous hybrid with a human head bending over something resembling a map of Warsaw. This work, by Andrzej Renes (who also did a monument to Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński in Warsaw), was unveiled on 10 November 1993.

\(^{91}\) Witos and Starzyński sharing the same space is particularly interesting if we remember that Witos, along with other members of the opposition, was arrested on the night of 9-10 September 1930, thrown into the Brest fortress, faced accusations at the 1931 Brest trial, and was sentenced to a year-and-a-half in prison. This entire action was carried out under orders from Marshal Piłsudski. Throughout the Brest events, Starzyński, who had taken part in the entire campaign of the 1st Brigade, was serving as Deputy Treasury Minister in the cabinet of Walery Sławek.

member of the Council for the Defense of the Capital, author of the brochure *Obrona Warszawy. Lud polski w obronie stolicy (wrzesień 1939)* (The Defense of Warsaw. The Polish people in defense of the capital [September 1939]), which was published anonymously by the underground press in late October or early November 1939 – pointed out the enormous role that radio had played throughout the siege. In his memoirs written after the war (a cycle of articles on “Warszawa we wrześniu 1939” were published in the London dailies *Dziennik Polski* and *Dziennik Żołnierza* in 1949), Zaremba developed this idea significantly. He was fascinated by Starzyński, his old friend from the youth organization *Związek Młodzieży Postępowo-Niepodległościowej*. The two men had gone on to take different ideological paths during the Second Republic (1919–1939), but the “ice was broken” by the mayor’s actions in September. Zaremba’s recognition of Starzyński went hand in hand with his reflections on the phenomenon of radio at the time.

The strongest stimulus, sometimes a narcotic, always the source for encouragement and a link for every unit or group within society, was Warsaw radio. Thanks to the courage and sacrifice of its staff, which had been greatly reduced by the evacuation, it functioned every day until noon, even though the Germans were concentrating their artillery fire in the area around its headquarters on Zielna Street. Every day the radio broadcast reactions from the world, saying that Warsaw’s sacrifice was not in vain, that our defense was echoing in Paris, London and New York. That it was raising anger, and a will to settle the score, with the invaders trying to enslave the world through the subjugation of Poland. In those days, Warsaw radio was able to echo the experiences of the entire population of Warsaw.

Zaremba’s comments are all the more valuable because they came from a person strongly opposed to the Sanacja regime.

There are no accounts or memoirs in which the figure of the Warsaw mayor does not appear; in some cases, he appears often, and in other cases, he appears only occasionally. Who was Starzyński for these authors? What terms did they use to describe him? What attributes did they ascribe to him? What did his radio addresses mean to them? How was his behavior behind the microphone received?

Above all, Starzyński was described using the term “hero.” This is not just the pure use of a conventional word or an empty linguistic gesture. For his radio listeners, the mayor’s heroism contained clear cultural meaning and historical significance. It was integrated into a sphere of culture that was closest to them,

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and to him. What we are talking about here, of course, is romantic heroism. The portrait sketched by pianist and composer Władysław Szpilman encompasses both the mayor’s characteristic external appearance and his moral condition. The two men met at the doors of the radio station on 23 September:

He was disheveled and unshaven, and his face wore an expression of deathly weariness. He hadn’t slept for days. He was the heart and soul of the defense, the real hero of the city. The entire responsibility for the fate of Warsaw rested on his shoulders.94

Starzyński was a “national hero and the hero of Warsaw,”95 he was a “hero in the war against the Germans”96 – which means his name was etched into the pages of Poland’s most glorious history. He was, after all, a “hero among heroes,” a Polish Vercingetorix97 – the fearless leader of the Gallic uprising against the Romans in 52-51 BCE. In this way, the heroism of the civil head of the defense of Warsaw assumed a knight-like, universal dimension.

Not just because of the actions he took as part of his official functions, but above all because of the actions he took on an everyday basis, the mayor was perceived as a defender. For writer Kazimierz Wierzyński, he was simply the “builder and defender of Warsaw,”98 the father of the city in times of peace and war. But most authors attribute a deeper meaning to the term defender. Colonel Tadeusz Tomaszewski, chief of staff for the Command of the Defense of Warsaw, described Starzyński as the “dynamic flywheel of a million-person city, the soul of absolute resistance.”99 Colonel Rola-Arciszewski referred to values of the highest order: “the ‘spiritual defender of Warsaw.’ This is what the people called him, this is what the military called him. And deservedly so. It will resound throughout Polish history with a clear chord.”100 Forty-two years after the fact, in calling

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95 Such were the words spoken during an academic ceremony in the Teatr Polski in September 1946 by the then current mayor of Warsaw, Stanisław Tołwiński. See A. K. Kunert, op cit.
96 Fragment of a dedication to the poem “Barbakan warszawski” by Kazimierz Wierzyński.
97 These are the words of Rola-Arciszewski, op. cit., 319, 330.
98 Fragment of a dedication to the poem “Barbakan warszawski” by Kazimierz Wierzyński..
100 S. Rola-Arciszewski, op. cit., 319.
Starzyński the “defender of the honor of the capital,”\textsuperscript{101} Primate Wyszyński made use of one of the key words that not only defined the stance taken by the mayor of Warsaw, but that also dominated the tone in which Warsaw’s defense has been written.

The person of Stefan Starzyński is often associated with steadfastness, his unaltering character, and thanks to his persistence against the German invaders, he occupies a permanent place in history. Antoni Słonimski, in his poem \textit{Popiół i wiatr}, published in the summer of 1940, wrote:

\begin{center}
Nie wiem, kogo Warszawa przeklinie czy zapomni,
Lecz w sercu długo jego zachowa jednego.
Nie giną bez pamięci tak jak on niezłomni.\textsuperscript{102}
\end{center}

I do not know whom Warsaw will curse or forget,
But in its heart it will hold one [person] for a long time.
The steadfast like him shall not be forgotten.

On the fifth anniversary of the outbreak of war, Aleksander Kamiński, on the pages of \textit{Biuletyn Informacyjny},\textsuperscript{103} drew out the symbolic meaning of Starzyński’s actions and the current-day message for Warsaw residents, as the city burned in the Uprising:

Thus spoke President Starzyński five years ago, the man who embodied, in the eyes of the country and the world, the fact that Warsaw is fighting steadfastly, that its belief is deep, that it is faithful to the end. Today President Starzyński is no longer with us. But His words remain here in the walls of the city, to fortify us in battle, to allow us to persevere.\textsuperscript{104}

In the case of Starzyński, “steadfast greatness” went hand in hand with simplicity. Many authors took note of this paradoxical quality. Colonel Rola-Arciszewski put it this way: “The soldier himself (he walked around in uniform and asked that he not be called president, but major) understood soldiers, and his steadfast greatness was felt by us in every way.”\textsuperscript{105} This connection between that which was extraordinary

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{101} During the ceremony dedicating the plate-memorial in St. John’s Archcathedral in Warsaw in January 1981. See A. K. Kunert, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{102} A. Słonimski, \textit{Poezje zebrane} (Warszawa 1964), 427.
\textsuperscript{103} Translator’s note: \textit{Biuletyn Informacyjny} was a Polish underground weekly published in the General Government of occupied Poland during the Second World War.
\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Biuletyn Informacyjny. Wydanie codziennie}, Warszawa, Friday 1 September 1944, R. VI, Nr 69 (277); quote from \textit{Biuletyn Informacyjny}. Część IV. Reprint from the years 1944-1945. “Powstanie warszawskie i konspiracja,” \textit{Przegląd Historyczno-wojskowy}, Nr specjalny 4 (205) (Warszawa 2004), 2274.
\textsuperscript{105} S. Rola-Arciszewski, op. cit., 319.
\end{flushleft}
in the mayor’s character with that which was common is shown in Jan Lechoń’s “Pieśń o Stefanie Starzyńskim” (Song about Stefan Starzyński), from the volume Lutnia po Bekwarku (1942). The character of Konstanty Julian Ordon - a sacred figure of Polish romantic legend who, in Adam Mickiewicz’s vision, dies in the rubble of his own redoubt, fighting to the end – appears there. The question arises:

Kto jest ten mały człowiek, co w ognistym deszczu  
Śród murów, co się wałą, jako posąg stoi?

Who is this little man, in the fiery rain  
Amidst the walls that have fallen, who stands like a statue?

Wanting to liberate himself from romantic pathos, he confirms it even more strongly:

Myślisz pewno, że to dziejów krater  
Wciąż tę samą wyrzuca romantyczną lawę  
I że to jeszcze jeden szalony bohater  
Nieopatrną, ułańską opętał Warszawę.

I tobie jeszcze ciągle marzy się o cudzie  
I o owych nadludziach, co się biją chrobrze.

Cudów chcesz? Pomyśl tylko, że są zwykli ludzie,  
Jak on, co zawsze wszystko chcą wypełnić dobrze.

You most likely think that this is the volcanic crater of history  
It still throws out the same romantic lava  
And that yet another crazy hero  
Possessed the careless, Uhlan-like Warsaw.

And you still dream of a miracle,  
Of superhumans who fight gallantly.  
Miracles you want? But just think, there are ordinary people,  
Like he, who always want to do things well.106

Tied to steadfastness is yet another term applied to Starzyński, namely “Książę niezłomny,” or “Prince Steadfast.” Wanda Kragen called him by this name in her “Kronika dni wrześniowych”: “Every evening I speak with Major Starzyński, Prince Steadfast of steadfast Warsaw.”107 Don Fernand, the hero of Calderon-Słowacki’s masterpiece, dies in captivity because he has rejected a deal that would have freed him in exchange for handing the ancient city of Ceuta over to the

106 J. Lechoń, Poezje (Warszawa 1979), 94.  
Moors. As Prince Steadfast, the Warsaw mayor attained the highest ennoble-
ment. In the two-decade interwar era, only Marshal Piłsudski was worthy of such an appellation.\textsuperscript{108}

Stefan Starzyński’s role in the defense of Warsaw, along with his presence
at the Polish Radio at 25 Zielna Street, is fully described in secondary litera-
ture.\textsuperscript{109} In my considerations here, I focus on the image of this character, how it
was formed in the minds of eye-witnesses, and how it can be reconstructed by
the records they left behind. Zygmunt Zaremba, cited above, left us a succinct
description of President Starzyński’s daily radio addresses, which were widely
and carefully listened to, and what they meant for Varsovians and other Poles.

The speeches delivered by political leaders and military spokesmen, and above all
Starzyński’s daily commentary, made the people aware of the meaning of the sacrifice,
stigmatized the crimes of the enemy, and gave satisfaction to built-up bitterness and
hatred. By exposing to the eyes of Varsovians the wounds that the enemy of the city was
inflicting, the voice of president Starzyński did not allow personal misfortune to crush

\textsuperscript{108} The appellation of resurrector of the nation, used to describe “Czterdzieści i cztery”

\textsuperscript{109} Two collections of documents have been published: \textit{Cywilna obrona Warszawy we wrześniu 1939 r. Dokumenty, materiały prasowe, wspomnienia i relacje}, ed.
L. Dobroszyczyk, M. M. Drozdowski, M. Getter, A. Słomczyński (Warszawa 1964); and \textit{Archiwum Prezydenta Warszawy Stefana Starzyńskiego}, ed. M. M. Drozdowski
(Warszawa 1984) devoted a great deal of space to the Warsaw prezydent. For more on
Starzyński’s role as head of the city’s civil defense, see A. Aksamitowski, \textit{“Działalność władz cywilnych Warszawy,”} in \textit{ Warszawa we wrześniu 1939 roku. Obrona i życie codzienne}, ed. Cz. Grzelak (Warszawa 2004). For the most recent biography penned by
M. M. Drozdowski, see \textit{Starzyński: legionista, polityk gospodarczy, prezydent Warszawy}
(Warszawa 2006), which provides a thorough description of Starzyński’s activities in
September and October 1939.
the collective will. He fused the individual’s pain with the common sense of the injuries being inflicted on the city, the nation. In front of the world and his own people, he condemned the barbarity of war on civilian populations and the brutal vandalism that was destroying the cultural heritage of centuries. He was able to reach into everyone’s hearts and to extract from them the noblest tones. And above all, this voice became stir-
ringly close when it became thoroughly hoarse from talking so often: that rough voice, now muffled and hoarse, uttered the most resonant words by which the city, in its ruins, could live.110

Starzyński revealed to his listeners the deeper meaning of the reality surrounding them. How distant we are from the informational and organizational dimension of his addresses! Of course he played an enormous role in the events playing out in the besieged city. In Dziennik z oblężonej Warszawy, Halina Regulska noted:

More than anything else, Starzyński wants to prevent panic. He says that everyone should stay where they belong. Do not take up space on the roads, which need to remain open for military traffic. Those who have left Warsaw should return to their homes and their occupations.111

But Zaremba did not write about this. He presented Starzyński more as a spiritual father explaining the “meaning of the sacrifice” endured by people affected by mis-
fortune. Speaking through the radio, the mayor was perceived by others in much the same way. Regulska called him the “spokesman for our suffering,” the one who “raises our spirits”; he “builds courage, he holds us up.”112 Many others spoke of “strengthening,” of “giving comfort,”113 of “keeping up spirits.”114

The words coming out of the radio speakers gave hope to those who had no hope, they “built trust and encouraged people to carry on in the most difficult – and increasingly difficult – conditions.”115 Which is why there was something ceremo-
nial about people listening to the radio together. In an entry dated 17 September, Halina Regulska wrote:

Listening to Starzyński in the evenings, as he talks on the radio, takes on the signifi-
cance of a celebration. We survived another day and we were happy that none of us had

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110 Zaremba, Wojna i konspiracja, 95-96.
111 H. Regulska, op. cit., 46.
112 Ibid., 86, 65, 72.
113 The account of P. Rotszyld from the Yad Vashem archive, 033/438, s. 7.
114 The account of S. Lorentz, registered in 1963, in Cywilna obrona Warszawy we wrześniu 1939 r., 267.
disappeared. After a hard day of work and difficulties we gathered around the radio, staring at the speaker, waiting for the words that could give us hope.\textsuperscript{116}

A community of listeners was created around the mayor and his speeches because, as Zaremba wrote: “He was able to reach into everyone’s hearts.” It seems that the purely practical qualities of his addresses are replaced by their clearly spiritual functions. Zaremba was on target when pointing to Starzyński’s particular skills, namely his ability to embed individual misfortune in the collective awareness of “the injuries being inflicted on the city, the nation,” and simultaneously to defend Varsovians against the paralyzing effects of suffering, and to prompt resistance.

In their testimonies, listeners devoted a great deal of space to how Starzyński spoke, and it was not just about the sound of his voice, but also the rhetoric that characterized his addresses, about his skills as an orator. The mayor emerges as an unequalled master of the live word, a man who perfectly guided his listeners’ emotions. Authors emphasized the simplicity, clarity and accuracy of his statements. As Ferdynand Goetel wrote in his memoirs about the occupation: “The Warsaw mayor’s short, commanding sentences pierced the air like lightning.”\textsuperscript{117} Warsaw journalist Jadwiga Krawczyńska described the mayor’s addresses as “short, matter-of-fact […], without cant, using the simplest words that everyone could understand.”\textsuperscript{118} Stanisław Lorentz remembered them as “lofty and powerful in their simplicity.”\textsuperscript{119} We read in other accounts about “pathos”\textsuperscript{120} and “power,”\textsuperscript{121} about “dignified and ardent speeches,”\textsuperscript{122} about the “President’s manly words.”\textsuperscript{123}

Starzyński spoke into the microphone and his words were heard over the sounds of artillery fire and exploding bombs, over the sounds of buildings falling and the roar of fire. Thus he was broadly received – as the one who calls out, summons, exhorts, cries out, and electrifies the listeners with his amazing hoarse voice. That hoarseness became legend, an indicator, a stigmata inextricably tied to the figure of Starzyński. There is no proper testimony in which the

\begin{thebibliography}{123}
\bibitem{116} H. Regulska, op. cit., 72.
\bibitem{118} J. Krawczyńska, op. cit., 41.
\bibitem{119} S. Lorentz, op. cit., 267.
\bibitem{120} For example, L. Landau, op. cit., 17 [record dated: 30 September 1939 -17 October 1939].
\bibitem{121} For example H. Regulska, op. cit., 47; Z. Petersowa, \textit{Wrzesień Warszawy 1939. Reportaz} (Warszawa 1946), 53.
\bibitem{122} Hirszfeld, \textit{The Story of One Life}, 173.
\bibitem{123} W. Kragen, op. cit., 190.
\end{thebibliography}
hoarse-voiced mayor does not appear. As the editor of *Biuletyn Informacyjny*, Aleksander Kamiński, recalled: “In his unbuttoned uniform, with his voice hoarse and weary, he screamed them [the words cited by Kamiński] rather than speaking them.”124 And the teenage Jewish girl, Pola Rotszyld, entered the following into her diary: “Day and night he called out through the radio in his hoarse voice.”125 Another Jewish diarist, Karol Rotgeber, wrote in 1943: “President Starzyński has grown so hoarse through his address on the radio and spurring [the city] to its defense.”126

Starzyński had great difficulty speaking. One of the presenters at Polish Radio, Józef Małgorzewski, wrote about meeting the mayor in the radio headquarters at 25 Zielna Street on 19 September.

Starzyński pointed to his throat. - “Worse and worse,” he said, hoarsely. “I don’t know how it will be in a couple days.” Greeting the mayor, Rudnicki said: “One needs to get enough sleep, to relax.” Rudnicki suggested: “Maybe a shot of cognac?” “No thank you…” Starzyński responded. “I like it [cognac] very much, naturally, but afterwards I would be even hoarser.”127

The hoarse *president* triggered among listeners a spontaneous reflex of assistance; the mayor was losing his voice and Varsovians tried to help in any way they could. With bombs falling, they delivered various medicines and flu remedies. Halina Regulska noted on 20 September:

Yesterday, because of a hoarse voice, he could barely speak. Today, touched as he was, he thanked the residents of Warsaw for showing so much heart. After yesterday’s address, he was overwhelmed by the medicine [sent to him] for the hoarse voice.128

The phenomenon of mayor Starzyński speaking through the microphone of the Polish Radio in September 1939 had its flip side, namely Colonel Roman Umiastowski. Today, the preserved fragments of Umiastowski’s radio addresses are cause for embarrassment. In fact, it is amazing that a person possessing his particular intellectual capacity and oratorical skills would be allowed to function as head of propaganda for the Polish Commander-in-Chief. Umiastowski combined the figure of a military poser with infantile argumentation, primitive manipulation, and outright lies, along with glaring incompetence in the Polish

124 *Biuletyn Informacyjny*. Wydanie codzienne, op. cit., 2274.
125 Ibid.
126 *Pamiętnik*, AŻIH zespol “Pamiętniki,” sygn. 48, 7-8.
128 H. Regulska, op. cit., 86.
language. It is important to emphasize that Umiastowski’s addresses were not freely improvised versions of texts prepared ahead of time, as was the case with Lieutenant Colonel Waclaw Lipiński and President Stefan Starzyński. Rather, Umiastowski’s speeches were carefully prepared and then laboriously read into the microphone. He made use of a mixture of poetics from barrack-room tales with phrases filled with admonition and instruction, all of which was delivered with a paternalistic tone with a pronounced speech defect (Umiastowski could not pronounce the “r”). His famous radio appeal, broadcast on 6 September 1939, calling on all men capable of carrying a firearm to immediately leave the city and move eastward, where a small reserve army would be created, led to catastrophic chaos. A mass of refugees fleeing in confusion blocked the roads, hindering military traffic, which thus became easy prey for German aircraft. The panic caused by this speech had to be controlled later by Starzyński.

It turned out that this appeal was the beginning of the end for the High Command’s head of propaganda. The next day he was roundly criticized by his colleagues, led by Lipiński, who submitted his resignation in protest. He was transferred to General Walerian Czuma’s staff as head of propaganda for the Command of the Defense of Warsaw. But Umiastowski did not concede defeat; in the evening of that same day he was seated once again before the microphone, at which time he called on the population to begin building barricades. He also provided valuable information on how to identify airplanes, and he offered essential advice for shooting rifles: “one can shoot only after confirming […] if an aircraft is ours or theirs. The German signs are a black cross with bent lines, the so-called swastika. Only German planes have these black signs. All others are either ours or those of our allies.”129 Umiastowski’s further statements were interrupted in a way that was unprecedented in the history of Polish Radio. President Starzyński called the studio and dressed down the speaker with the microphone open. Umiastowski was able to finish reading his address, but it was his last public appearance. After the personal intervention of Starzyński, the appointed civil head of the Command of the Defense of Warsaw, Umiastowski was dismissed from his position as top propagandist. He then evacuated eastward along with the High Command.

At the foundation of Starzyński’s message was the calm that emanated from the recognition of his own spiritual powers, a sense of moral superiority over the invaders, and the certainty of ultimate victory in defense of what was right. On 28 August 1939 he spoke over the radio and called on Varsovians to report

129 Quote from M. J. Kwiatkowski, op. cit., 92.
for work digging anti-aircraft trenches: “Citizens of the capital! […] Our spirits are high, complete calm, we all know that we give of ourselves whenever needs arise.”

On the fifth day of the war, he called out: “Citizens […] we must maintain a shared sense of calm, all possible calm and order.”

In the face of ever increasing bombing, he told his listeners: “Our hearts are gripped by remorse as we watch our homes, palaces and churches tumble every day. But do not cry, do not become desperate, do not let your spirits fall.”

On 20 September Starzyński spoke words that provide a key to his broader message:

In the afternoon hours German planes once again dropped bombs on the city […] But the war is not finished and we calmly watch the destruction of Polish territory, we watch calmly because we are a vibrant nation, one which has shown its strength generation after generation, the strength of its soul, one which will rebuild what the barbarian invaders have destroyed.

What was this calm that was tied Starzyński’s addresses?

First of all, it was a calm (felt in defiance of the desperate situation, and in the face of obvious defeat) that flowed from the unwavering certainty that – using the words of a poet – “my victory will be beyond the grave […].”

The righteousness and spiritual value behind the heroic decisions regarding the defense of Warsaw, and the resulting “burying oneself under the rubble of the city,” would triumph in the end. Such argumentation fell under a different category than the calculations of diplomats and politicians (the effectiveness and believability of allies), the purely military considerations (the balance of forces and means, battle tactics and strategies), the human and materials costs of battle. Because the real battle was being waged on another level. It was a war waged by Juliusz Słowacki’s “Król-Duch” (translated variously as “King-Spirit” or “The Spirit King”) and Prince Steadfast. Thus, we are “calm” because another kind of victory – not military, but spiritual – is awaiting us.

Second, we calmly watch the destruction of Polish territory, because the destruction of that which is external does not encroach upon our spiritual capability, which we will strengthen, harden, turn into something even richer and

130  Ibid., 44.
131  Ibid., 76.
133  Quote from Archiwum Prezydenta Warszawy Stefana Starzyńskiego, op. cit., 283-284.
134  This fragment can be found near the end of Słowacki’s V Pieśń Beniowski. Quote from J. Słowacki, Utwory wybrane, vol. 1 (Warszawa 1965), 355.
135  This fragment is from an article in the underground publication Znak dated 11 May 1940. Quote from A. K. Kunert, op. cit.
more powerful. The death of the city and its inhabitants does not weaken the spirit of the nation; quite the contrary, it makes it stronger, more capable of surviving further catastrophes and of reconstructing what has been destroyed.

Third, we are not guided by emotions (“regret,” “tears,” “desperation”) but by something much deeper and more durable than a variable, momentary mood. Which is why we watch the destruction calmly, and why the cataclysm raging around us cannot drag us into desperation. The source of this calm is the “strength and force of our spirit.” Catastrophe could not break that spirit, but would strengthen it; the persistent defense of Warsaw, in flames, was the arena for a great spiritual test. “Citizens,” Starzyński called out through the radio microphone on 11 September, “the more difficult, the worse it gets, the more spiritual strength we have.”

The bombardment ruining the city was a manifestation of the barbaric fury of destruction, but it also fueled the fire in which the most precious metals are forged. Following this line of reasoning, one can say that the following stanza, used by Jerzy Andrzejewski (author of the 1948 novel Ashes and Diamonds) as a metaphorical description of the first postwar months in Polish history, takes on a particular relevance. In Warsaw, in flames in September 1939, we detect a dilemma called forth by Cyprian Norwid:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Czy popiół tylko zostanie i zamęt,} \\
\text{Co idzie w przepaść z burzą? – czy zostanie} \\
\text{Na dnie popiołu gwiaździsty dyjament,} \\
\text{Wiekuistego zwycięstwa zaranie!...} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Will only ashes and confusion remain,
What will fall into the void of the storm? – or will there remain
A star-like diamond under the ashes,
The dawn of everlasting victory!...

And in those flames, that dilemma seems to have been solved.

The more Warsaw is severely and terribly destroyed today, the more beautiful it will be rebuilt in the future. Starzyński said so more than once, including on 15 September: “After the war is won, we will build a new and more beautiful Warsaw.” And four days later he added: “We will rebuild the destruction and charred remains. If we don’t do it, our children will.”

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136 Quote from M. J. Kwiatkowski, op. cit., 131.
138 Quote from J. Małgorzewski, op. cit., 285.
139 Quote from Archiwum Prezydenta Warszawy Stefana Starzyńskiego, op. cit., 275-276.
Pocztowa Kasa Oszczędności (the Postal Savings Bank, PKO) along with representatives of the Council for the Defense of the Capital. It was there that the decision was made to capitulate. In his account of the event, Colonel Tadeusz Tomaszewski described the mayor’s characteristic behavior and his words:

When someone pointed out that the fires are destroying beautiful buildings, that Warsaw has ceased to exist, Starzyński, like a powerful bison, lowered his head toward the man crying over spilt milk and said, with great strength and conviction: “We will rebuild [the city] three times more beautiful.”

Defending Warsaw, the mayor emerged as both the city’s Great Builder and its Great Destroyer. Aleksander Władysław Zawadzki, who was the civil head of defense for the Warsaw district of Praga, recalled his conversation with Starzyński on the night of 27 and 28 September:

[…] he began talking about the drama he was living through, watching the devastation of Warsaw, the city he wanted to build, watching the frustrated defense of the capital, which he had begun with such faith and zeal.

This dramatic – one is tempted to write: demiurgical – tension between creation and destruction appears particularly in poetic accounts. In one poem in her cycle Jesień niezapomniana (1946), Hanna Mortkowicz-Olczacowa adds to the topos “the more terrible it is, the more beautiful it is” a spatial metaphor that offers up a wonderful paradox: the more the city collapses into rubble, the higher its builder rises.

Jan Lechoń illustrates the tragedy of Starzyński, who agreed to the destruction of Warsaw – his own work – in the name of higher values. Once again we are immersed in the topos “the more terrible it is, the more beautiful it is.”

140 T. Tomaszewski, op. cit., 127.
141 Account from March 1946. Quote from Cywilna obrona Warszawy we wrześniu 1939 r., 486.
142 Quote from D. Patkaniowska, op. cit., 247.
I cóż że z marzeń moich wszystkich rośnie cmentarz?
Ale ty, co tu przyjdiesz kiedyś, zapamiętasz,
Że jest coś piękniejszego niż murów piękno.\(^{143}\)

And he, when the city was a red torch,
He said, “I will not give up. Let those buildings burn
Let my proud work break down into dust!
So what if my dreams turn into a cemetery?
But you who will come here remember,
That there is something more beautiful than the beauty of walls.

Antoni Słonimski captured this tragic collision most succinctly, almost in aphoristic form, writing that the mayor:

Który wiernie stolicy jak nikt inny służył,
Dumnie ją rozbudował - jeszcze dumniej zburzył.\(^{144}\)

Who faithfully served the capital like no other,
And who proudly built it up – has even more proudly destroyed it.

Stefan Starzyński’s last radio address, broadcast on 23 September, creates an image of Warsaw around the romantic topos of the hero’s beautiful death.\(^{145}\)

I wanted Warsaw to be great. I believed Warsaw would be great. Me and my staff drew up plans, made sketches of a great Warsaw of the future. And Warsaw is great. It happened more quickly than we had supposed. Not in fifty years, not in a hundred, but today I see a great Warsaw. As I speak to you now, through the window I see, enveloped by clouds of smoke, reddened by flames, a wonderful, indestructible, great, battling Warsaw in all its greatness and glory. And although there are ruins where fine orphanages should stand, even though there are barracks covered with corpses where there should be parks, even though our libraries are engulfed in flames, even though hospitals burn, then not in fifty years, nor in a hundred years, but today Warsaw, defending Poland’s honor, is at the height of its greatness and glory.\(^{146}\)

\(^{143}\) J. Lechoń, op. cit., 93-94.
\(^{144}\) A. Słonimski, op. cit., 427.
\(^{145}\) For more on the Greek presentation of the “beautiful death” of a young warrior dying a hero’s death, and on the “beautiful corpse” of a hero resting on the battlefield, see J.-P. Vernant, “Śmierć grecka – śmierć o dwóch obliczach,” in Wymiary śmierci, ed. and intro. S. Rosiek (Gdańsk 2002). Two sculptures nicely represent the aesthetic canon of the “beautiful death”: the Hellenistic “Dying Gaul” in the Capitoline Museums in Rome and Michelangelo’s “Dying Slave” in the Louvre. For more on the various dimensions of the topos of the hero’s death, see M. Janion, Czas formy otwartej. Tematy i media romantyczne (Warszawa 1984), 101-125.
\(^{146}\) Several apocryphal versions of this speech have survived, as jotted down by eye-witnesses and listeners. Unfortunately, among the surviving original recordings from...
The hero was the battling city, which was collapsing under the blows of the overwhelming enemy forces, but which was rescuing its honor and achieving – in defeat – true victory. The enemy’s destructive fury rendered the dream of a city-garden impossible, but it did not destroy the city as a particular version of fate, as a plan for existence. On the contrary, along this path of paradoxical transformation, such fury allowed the city to reveal itself in full, or – one might say – to shine in the fire of bombardment.

Before we trace the basis of this thought construct, let us turn our attention to an important matter that not only helped create the scenery in which the mayor’s speeches resounded, but also reinforced the themes of those speeches, and directs our attention directly to the source of their ideational tradition. To the point: Starzyński’s addresses were accompanied by Casimir Delavigne’s “Warszawianka,” one of the three songs (alongside “Mazurek Dąbrowskiego” and “Boże, coś Polskę”) that – as Maria Janion has written – “mark the lineage of modern Polish patriotism, shaped primarily by romanticism.” In a fictionalized report of J. Wołowski, a radio journalist and participant in the defense of Warsaw, the sounds of “Warszawianka” could be heard, in a symbolic way, at the beginning and end of Starzyński’s last address:

Starzyński entered the studio. From the speaker mounted on the wall, one could hear “Warszawianka.” […] It came to an end. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. A large group of people were standing in the doorway. Even those whose homes had been burned came out of their shelters and crowded around to listen to Starzyński. A way was made for him to squeeze between the people, who applauded. Someone ran up with a hot coffee. The sound of “Warszawianka” came again from the speaker, which had not yet been turned off.

In this radioman’s recollection, put through the filter of romantic mythology, “Warszawianka” not only provided a musical background, but also served

September 1939, there are only seven with Starzyński’s voice, and there is no recording of the mayor’s last speech. Quote from M. J. Kwiatkowski, op. cit., 272 (for information about recordings that survived, see ibid., 340-341). An identical text was published in Archiwum Prezydenta Warszawy Stefana Starzyńskiego, op. cit., 294. In an account written in August 1963, J. Małgorzewski cites a longer and slightly modified version (even more dramatized), but this is rather unreliable, since the author claims that Starzyński’s last radio address took place on 26 September, which is impossible, simply because, after the massive bombing of “black Monday” on 25 September, Warsaw was without electricity.

147 M. Janion, Reduta. Romantyczna poezja niepodległościowa (Kraków 1979), 7.
148 “Tak bylo” was published in 1962. Quote from D. Patkaniowska, op. cit., 250.
as ideational and rhetorical inspiration. Starzyński seemed to call out to the residents of the Polish capital with words that echo Delavigne’s tune, with its extreme intransigence, its absolute dictate to defend the threatened “redoubt,” its patriotic radicalism. In Wołowski’s apocryphal version of the mayor’s last address, Starzyński believes that “justice will prevail over crimes,” that “liberty will come out triumphant. With such faith, one can die without complaint.” There would appear to be echoes of “Warszawianka” in the mayor’s words about “thousands of unburied corpses,” about the notion that the “entire city remains engaged in a deadly struggle” and “will soon be a flattened square covered with corpses.”

The scene ends with a description of eye-witness reactions to the mayor’s final radio address. In rapture, almost in a trance, they give Starzyński a great ovation. In the midst of applause and the thunder of exploding bombs, Starzyński – along with his listeners – enters that sphere of the romantic community united in an act of patriotic sacrifice.

As many accounts of the events of September 1939 indicate, Polish Radio broadcasted the melody and lyrics of “Warszawianka” throughout the entire siege of Warsaw. This song’s call, which reached the summit of patriotic radicalism (“those who survive will be free/those who die are already free,” or “today is the day of your triumph or your death!”), which led a handful of Polish conspirators to battle in November 1831, was – in a certain sense – embedded in the logic of the military actions undertaken by the residents of the million-resident Polish capital and determined the fate of the soldiers defending the city and its civilian inhabitants (the difference between them, after all, being non-existent).

On 28 September 1939 (that is, the day after the capitulation document was signed and during a three-day cease-fire) an article appeared in Kurier Warszawski under the symptomatic title Odbudujemy jeszcze stolicę (We will rebuild the capital). Beyond the promise that Warsaw would be rebuilt “greater

150 Quote from D. Patkaniowska, op. cit. What is involved here is the following passage from Delavigne’s song: “Lub zwyciężym - lub gotowi / Z trupów naszych tamę wzniesć, / By krok spóźnić olbrzymowi, / Co chce światu pęta nieść.” Quote from M. Janion, Reduta. Romantyczna poezja niepodległościowa, 110. An echo of this romantic frenzy can be heard in an unpublished poem of M. Ubisz from the year 1955, entitled “Song of the Prezydent.” The motif of barricades with corpses is packed into a poetic construction that, against the author’s intentions, takes on a grotesque character. Here, Starzyński stands alone “on a hundred barricades/he arranges the bodies of his children on the ground.” Quote from Archiwum Prezydenta Warszawy Stefana Starzyńskiego, op. cit., 345.
and more splendorous” than ever before, we read about a category of evidence confirming the heroic myth of Warsaw: the fulfillment of a soldier’s duty and the sacrifice made at the altar of the Motherland.

Beautiful Warsaw does not exist anymore, the historic Warsaw we all knew no longer exists, but there is the heroic Warsaw, whose history will be recorded as being among the most heroically defended cities of the world. Warsaw, which fulfilled its obligation to the motherland, like a soldier and up to the very last moment. We firmly believe that historical justice must prevail, that soon Warsaw will once again be the capital of a great and mighty Poland. We will rebuild Warsaw greater and more splendorous than it was. Our sacrifice on the altar of the Motherland was very great, but it will certainly bring great benefits.151

In an underground brochure entitled *Obrona Warszawy* (the defense of Warsaw), published in late October or early November 1939, Zbigniew Zaremba carried out what could be one of the first codifications of language explaining Warsaw’s actions and those of the mayor.

Thus to hold out to the very last moment is a matter of honor, but it also provides testimony that Poles are prepared to make every sacrifice for their freedom. […] [When] the organized defense of the capital was launched, one was under no illusion about a victorious end. It was about holding back the enemy and maintaining Poland’s honor. Through her sacrifice [Warsaw] proved how dear the freedom of their motherland is to Poles.152

Such language conjures up imagery, preserved in romantic poetry, from the September defense of Warsaw against Field Marshal Ivan Paskevich in 1831. The references are clear. In verse written by Jan Janiczek, a soldier in the Związek Walki Zbrojnej – Armia Krajowa (Union of Armed Struggle-Home Army, ZWZ-AK) who died in 1944, Starzyński “will not give up the capital, […] /he holds high the banner of the martyr city,/With ‘Warszawianka’ on our lips – until it has fallen!”153 Colonel Rola-Arciszewski referred directly to patriotism’s romantic canon when he wrote that the mayor took up the defense of Warsaw “like a soldier whom one leaves behind at a post about to be overrun.”154

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151 Quote from *Cywilna obrona Warszawy we wrześniu 1939 r.*, 123-124.
153 From the poem “Ratusz” in the cycle *Warszawa wrześniowa*, printed in the first underground “Antologia poezji współczesnej” with the false date of 1937 (in fact, it was the end of 1940, beginning of 1941). Janiczek was the initiator of this anthology, along with S. Miłaszewski (1886-1944). Quote from D. Patkaniowska, op. cit., 244.
account written in March 1946 by Artur Śliwiński, head of Warsaw’s Committee for Social Assistance, during the last meeting of the Citizens Committee (of which Śliwiński was a member):

*President* Starzyński stood by his position that Warsaw had to be defended to the last breath and that he was the soul of the capital’s defense [...]. In a fiery speech he argued that the defense of Warsaw is the sacred duty of every soldier who had a weapon in his hand, that that is where the free motherland is, and that everyone has to defend the free motherland. If we fulfill our obligations and hold out till the end, this work will not have been in vain. If it happens that everything seems lost, we will be saved by a “miracle.”

Starzyński stands on the ramparts of Warsaw like the “last gunner” from a sonnet by Stefan Garczyński. In this romantic verse, the powerful enemy is overwhelming a handful of defenders and there is no hope for victory:

*Konie wszystkie poległy - żołnierze wybici -
Dowódca tylko jeden z dwoma pozostały,
Oszanowany w trupy jak w zastępne wały,*

All the horses have died - the soldiers have died -
Only the commander and two others remained, Entrenched in the corpses like a makeshift rampart.

But the defense continues and the one that remained is still alive:

*spiż moczy w krwi bratniej
I znowu dym i świeci kanonier ostatni.*

The cannon is soaked in fraternal blood And again the smoke and the last cannoneer shines.

In one of Słowacki’s poems, General Sowiński defends the trenches of Wola to the very end: stabbed to death by bayonets he dies, at the foot of an altar, a martyr’s death. We should recall that Starzyński was called “Prince Steadfast of steadfast Warsaw.” In Calderon-Słowacki’s drama, Don Fernand chooses death, though he had the opportunity to save his own life through a deal with the enemy. He dies in the act of a martyr’s sacrifice. Such a death leads to immortality: “the bloody body opens up/And God liberates the soul,/And revives it for the ages.”

The Portuguese *Infante* prefers to die than to allow the enemy to take the city. In light of the character Prince Steadfast, the decision to defend the besieged city off

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155 Quote from *Archiwum Prezydenta Warszawy Stefana Starzyńskiego*, op. cit., 287.  
Warsaw in September 1939 until the very end takes on a particular dimension, one that is more religious than military.

Romantics practiced the cult of honor, and – as Maria Janion has claimed, describing the experience of honor among Calderon’s heroes – a sense of honor was one of the most important Polish national features. Reading Calderon’s drama, Słowacki glimpsed something more than chivalric heroism. And in his congenially paraphrased version of that work, the Polish poet created a symbiosis of the knightly ethos and the Christian ethic of sacrifice. Don Fernand turns from being a knight in defense of freedom to its martyr-devotee. For Romantics, such sacrifice had the “power to make history”; indeed it was as important as (and sometimes more highly valued than) the “grandeur of military triumph.” Mickiewicz’s Ordon and Słowacki’s General Sowiński do not die. For them, death creates the prospect of life. Let us once again quote from the work of Maria Janion:

According to the religion of romantic patriotism, the one who dies for the motherland experiences ascension immediately. [...] Around the hero’s death the romantic poet built, above all, a value system that turned out to be the core of national existence.

Reading an article from the underground publication Znak (10 May 1940), we come upon romantic historiosophy and its explanation for the September 1939 defeat. I want to cite a long passage from this text since – in my view – it provides an excellent example of this type of thinking. The author wrote about mayor Starzyński:

He grew out of this terrible collapse; from the edifice of the Republic he took hold of the white-red banner [the Polish flag] and planted it on the walls of Warsaw. And when it seemed that nothing could save the honor of the Polish nation, he took upon himself the great burden and decided to defend Warsaw. With his iron will, he cut himself off from all those with whom he shared the same background but who had fled beyond the borders of Poland. He alone had a sense of responsibility. [...] All of Warsaw in flames is still defending itself. In flames and in ruins. Let us now calmly consider, from the perspective of seven months, whether the sacrifice made in Warsaw, especially in those last two days, was necessary. [...] Someone will perhaps tell me that the defense of Warsaw was extended unnecessarily to the 27th. [...] No! Great guilt is redeemed at great expense. Great work is built with great sacrifice. In rescuing the honor of the Republic, one could not simply accept the siege, one could not hesitate from making the ultimate sacrifice. We had to pay with blood. For defeat. For collapse. For the breakup of our state.

158 See M. Janion, Życie pośmiertne Konrada Wallenroda (Warszawa 1990), 154-155.
159 See M. Janion, M. Żmigrodzka, Romantyzm i historia (Warszawa 1978), 190-191.
160 M. Janion, Czas formy otwartej, 116,125.
machinery. The defense of Warsaw laid the foundation for the construction of a new and powerful Poland. [...] The defense of Warsaw transformed the defeat of Poland into an act that will be recorded in history with memorable and immortal words. [...] And that is why the defense of Warsaw was necessary. Her charred remains were necessary, as were the crosses made of sticks and planted in old street flower boxes.¹⁶¹

According to the schema that we know from romantic literature: defeat turns into victory, death in the battle for sacred liberty becomes an expiatory sacrifice for national guilt and the collapse of the state. Today’s suffering becomes the seed for future harvests, because the martyrdom of the capital and its inhabitants ennobles and sublimates those who defend it, and those who die for it, and with it.

Such enchanting words as “honor,” “sacrifice” and “altar of the motherland” impart the tone of the great bulk of political commentary and literary and memoiristic testimonies.¹⁶² The tradition out of which this language grew was obvious to everyone who, in the interwar period, was educated in the state-promoted cult of romanticism and the Polish Bards.¹⁶³ Starzyński, a soldier in the 1st Brigade of the Polish Legions, always had the highest regard for Marshal Piłsudski – the Polish Król-Duch – and for the romantic patriotic tradition. He was also under the clear influence of political romanticism as practiced by the Sanacja regime. In the years 1924–1926 he tied himself to the school of Adam Skwarczyński, a post-romantic ideologue associated with the Piłsudskiites and editor of Droga, a leading theoretical organ of the Piłsudski camp. Starzyński was

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¹⁶¹ Quote from A. K. Kunert, op. cit.
¹⁶² In his excellent study of wartime émigré poetry, W. Ligeża points out that in the poetry, prose, journalism, reportages and pamphlets of that time, an ideological and stylistic canon of writing about Warsaw as a heroic city established itself. We come upon the topos of the Warsaw of battle, one that takes on a sacral dimension, and the Warsaw of martyrdom, described in terms of martyr-oriented sacrifice. A marked contradiction emerges: “Warsaw is a city that is dead and alive, condemned to defeat and yet victorious, disgraced and yet holy.” The author points to the “romantic way of interpreting the city’s martyrdom” as a “necessary link between the present defeat and future victory. [...] Warsaw is called the capital of honor, persistence, and sacrifice.” W. Ligeża, Jerozolima i Babilon. Miasta poetów emigracyjnych (Kraków 1998), 26-27, 31.
one of the leaders of a semi-legal organization called the Zakon (the “Order”), whose ideological head was Skwarczyński.\footnote{See M. M. Drozdowski, Starzyński: Legionista, 95, 104.}

The city of Warsaw, crumbling under bombardment and consumed by fire, was often viewed as a kind of spectacle playing out before the eyes of all Poland, but one which was intended above all – even especially – for the outside world to see. This spectacle was revelatory in nature. It was supposed to reveal the truth, expose the deeper meaning of events. It was also supposed to be a twinge of conscience for everyone who was unworthy of the great matters around which the battle was being waged; for those who were deaf to the calls for help, who had abandoned their ally and betrayed their values, in whose name Warsaw and its inhabitants were burning on a funeral pyre. One can hardly escape the impression that the defense of the capital has been the object of romantic theatricalization. Maria Janion has described November 1830 as a “clash between history and theater”, and a kind of “theatricalization beyond the theater,” in which “society presents itself.”\footnote{See M. Janion, Czas formy otwartej, 126-140.} We can apply such a diagnosis to violent periods of social disruption, to transformative historical events, to situations marked by collective limit experiences, which September 1939 undoubtedly was for Poles.

We find this tone in the following apocryphal version of Starzyński’s last address:

Warsaw is burning. Warsaw, bombed constantly from the air and the ground, has been turned into rubble. We have no lights, no water, no food. Seventy thousand killed, one hundred thousand wounded - this is the result of the terrible fury of the invaders. […] Let all the radio stations, especially the French stations, that hear us repeat to the whole world: Warsaw is defending itself, Warsaw is fighting. Poland is not yet lost!\footnote{Quote from J. Małgorzewski, op. cit., 296-297. It is important to mention that the numbers given here are hyperbole; the number of killed mentioned here is six times larger than actual estimates. Historians have calculated civilian losses in September 1939 at around 10,000 killed and between 50,000 and 60,000 injured. On the Polish side, about 2,000 Polish soldiers died and about 16,000 were injured. See ibid., p. XXVII.}
dead.”¹⁶⁷ Let us recall here another passage from a romantic poem: “So let them see us – when we are dying!”¹⁶⁸ which could serve as poetic commentary on the recollections of Halina Święcka-Skoczkowa, from the Technical Department of the Warsaw Municipality. Describing a briefing of city hall staff members in the second half of September, which took place during an air attack, Święcka-Skoczkowa quoted words spoken by Starzyński: “The echo of bombs falling on our city, and the roar of buildings collapsing into rubble, resonate throughout all of Europe, [...] your burdens and your work are not going to waste.”¹⁶⁹ Janusz Regulski, the Head Commandant of the Citizens’ Guard, reported in turn on the farewell address he delivered at a gathering of Citizens’ Guard functionaries on 28 September, after the capitulation had been signed, in the presence of the president:

I said that Warsaw, through its heroic stance toward the enemy, provided an example to the world about how to fulfill the most difficult duties [...] It happened that Warsaw was surrounded by an aureole of heroism, and we owe that, in the first place, to our heroic president Starzyński. With tears in his eyes, Starzyński kissed me, and the entire hall gave a standing ovation.¹⁷⁰

In an exceptionally condensed form, the motif of theatricalization appears in an article by Henryk Lukrec published on 22 September in Robotnik (The Worker). The author called on residents of the city to document events happening around them, so that a chronicle of the siege could be written straight away. His appeal was preceded by imagery that was full of pathos and frenzy:

The city is dripping in blood, it is burning; it glows ominously; it is trembling and collapsing under the weight of shells and bombs, but its greatness is nonetheless increasing, and by the power of its will and its dignity, it is ascending above the earth, visible to the entire intelligent and sentient world.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Account written in 1958. Quote from *Cywilna obrona Warszawy we wrześniu 1939 r.*, 400.
¹⁷⁰ J. Regulski, *Straż Obywatelska. Wrzesień 1939 r.* Quote from *Cywilna obrona Warszawy we wrześniu 1939 r.*, 358.
¹⁷¹ H. Lukrec, *Piszcie kroniki w ogniu*. Quote from *Cywilna obrona Warszawy we wrześniu 1939 r.*, 115.
The martyrdom of Warsaw was an extraordinary spectacle playing out on the global stage: toward, and for, the entire world. Everything happening in Warsaw in September 1939 (the siege, defense, bombardment, destruction, suffering, and death) had great and unquestioned value. In the context of Poland’s national history, it was yet another battle for freedom carried out against the enemy’s disproportionate strength. Once again, a handful of noble and steadfast Poles were standing up to the power of an aggressor that applied criminal methods in battle. What we have here is a model drawn from Mickiewicz’s *Reduta Ordana*: brightness is flooded by great darkness (“the redoubt still in the middle, brightness from the shots, it reddens over the black”). There is, in addition, the motif of Warsaw, in battle against the enemy, confirming its eternal love of freedom over everything else and fighting to the last drop of blood. And – in the moral dimension – we once again see a demonstration of the steadfast soul, a willful determination, testimony to the highest patriotic virtues.

This is what Warsaw has to say and show to the world. The world can take note of, and hear, Warsaw only in the pathos of its martyrdom, “with streaming blood” and “collapsing under artillery shells and bombs.” Warsaw speaks to the world in the language of martyrdom and destruction – only then will it be visible to the world, only then will it “ascend above the earth.” The only way to exist in front of the world is to die and be buried in the rubble.

Starzyński was thus a voice, one who calls out, and one who calls forth. His addresses had three main intended audiences.

First – they represented a summons directed at Starzyński’s fellow countrymen and were formulated using the language of radical romantic patriotism, in the spirit of “Warszawianka,” broadcast over the radio waves during the siege. On 17 September, Halina Regulska drew up this text based on one of the mayor’s addresses: “Though each day […] brings so many victims and so much destruction, we must endure and hold out, in the name of the greatness of the Cause! Citizens! Be filled with the spirit of the offensive, because we will hold out, we will be victorious.” In Józef Małgorzewski’s recollection, Starzyński declared on 21 September: “We are unshaken in our belief that we will endure. It might continue to be difficult, and it might get more difficult and worse, but of one thing we can be sure: ‘Victory will be ours!’”

Second – Starzyński was addressing Poland’s allies, the entire world, though this call was not formulated using the language of diplomacy. Rather,
it was an appeal to conscience and moral obligation. His words were hard and uncompromising. The question was turned into a demand. On 15 September, Starzyński said:

We remind our allies France and England of their commitments. Warsaw is fighting, Warsaw is defending itself. Every day tons of iron are falling on our open city, where over a million people live, including women and children. The enemy, our eternal enemy, sets hundreds of fires every day, our homes are being turned into rubble. They are murdering thousands of innocent victims. How long will we have to wait for the effective action of our allies and their heroic forces? You tell us that you are dropping leaflets on Berlin while the Germans drop thousands of bombs on Warsaw. [...] We demand retaliatory action. We demand the fulfillment of obligations!\(^\text{174}\)

Four days later he renewed this appeal, lending it an even more dramatic tone.

The lonely Polish capital - Warsaw is putting up heroic resistance to all attacks by the enemy, on land and in the air. But what are you doing, our allies, who have promised us help, who pledged to stand by us in times of hardship? I ask a second time: what are you doing to fulfill your obligations? The dead and dying ask. The women and children of tormented Poland, of tormented Warsaw, they ask ... We are waiting for your answer. We are waiting for your actions.\(^\text{175}\)

Third – Starzyński directed his words at the invaders, using various poetic warnings: “And you, criminals under the contaminated cross, remember that it is historical justice that will pay for our suffering, for our tears, for our blood, for our injuries. Remember …,”\(^\text{176}\) or imprecations: “Today Germany dumped ten wagons of ammunition on Warsaw. Hell, you can dump ten times more and you still won’t take Warsaw, since nothing can break the spirit of our resistance.”\(^\text{177}\)

The Germans respected the strength of the Warsaw mayor’s voice and the power of its influence, and in their own way they expressed their appreciation. Stefan Starzyński was arrested on 27 September 1939. The Gestapo rummaged through desks and cabinets at Warsaw’s town hall in search of documents with the mayor’s signature under death sentences to be meted out to traitors and saboteurs apprehended during the siege. But Gestapo agents were looking for something more, namely the texts of Starzyński’s September radio addresses and press interviews.

\(^{174}\) Ibid., 285.
\(^{175}\) Ibid., 289-290.
\(^{176}\) Ibid.
\(^{177}\) Ibid., 296.
Neither the date nor the circumstances surrounding Starzyński’s death is known. One version of the story, recorded by prisoners at Dachau, where the mayor was supposed to be an inmate, contains a shocking detail.

In October 1943, SS men played recordings of Starzyński’s September addresses without break day and night, transmitting them into his cell. Finally, they dragged the battered and exhausted president to the camp courtyard, ordered him to dig a grave, and read out his sentence. Then an SS unit under the command of Bockführer Lesman fired the shots that took Starzyński’s life.178

Thus, the executioners decided to torment their victim with that which had been his greatest weapon and had become the focus of his fame. Starzyński died while tortured by the echo of words which he had spoken over the air waves in besieged Warsaw, but which now – diabolically – were degraded and mocked.

Ironic Criticism

Karol Irzykowski’s sarcasm, which is on display in many of the entries in his diary that touch upon the September defense of Warsaw and the early days of the occupation, represented – at least in part – a way to shake off the effects of the depressing defeat: the fall of Poland, the destruction and capitulation of Warsaw, and his personal misfortune. In the final stage of the siege, the writer’s apartment at 6 Sierpnia Street was completely burned down. It is generally known that, at the beginning of the occupation, the prewar Polish government – burdened as it was by responsibility for the military defeat – was the object of almost universal bitterness, indignation, condemnation, and even hostility within Polish society. Historians have written about this fact,179 and countless diarists and authors, above all, have expressed such views. We will have an opportunity to quote from some of them.

178 M. M. Drozdowski, Starzyński: Legionista, 441. Drozdowski offers six versions of Starzyński’s death: he died in the Spandau prison in Berlin; he was shot in a park in Kłarysiew, south of Warsaw, in the winter of 1939/1940; in Dachau on 17 October 1943; in the Dora concentration camp at the beginning of 1945; in the Flossenbürg camp in the spring of 1945; in Baalberge in the spring of 1944. See ibid., 440-442.

179 See, among others, T. Szarota, who cites reports on the situation in the country at this time, saying for example: “The main characteristic of [...] moods is an inexorably hateful attitude toward the culprits of defeat. Widely regarded as such are the previous government and especially President Moscicki.” (February 1940). Quote from Szarota, Okupowanej Warszawy dzień powszedni. Studium historyczne (Warszawa 1988), 478.
But refusal to participate in the heroic myth and rejection of martyrological exaltation had significantly deeper motivations, which are connected to Irzykowski’s attitude toward collective national emotions and political legends, with his defense of the sovereignty of the klerk.\textsuperscript{180} Significantly, it was with the scenery of occupied Warsaw as a backdrop that Irzykowski wrote his novel Wyspa (Island) – his testimony to klerkizm, to which he often referred in his journal. The author’s use of rational and analytical methods has unescapable consequences; the reality of war is subjected to a test of critical thinking, a sober adjudication of facts and actions. “I will pound this matter out logically,”\textsuperscript{181} is a comment that is preceded by Irzykowski’s reflections on the recent, murderous bombardment of Warsaw. One might well treat this view as an aphoristic abbreviation that defines Irzykowski’s intellectual profile. The message of patriotic radicalism, which was central to the heroic tradition, does not surrender to tests of logical reasoning. Irzykowski – klerk and anti-hagiographer – rejected the old (so-called romantic) tradition and the contemporary (so-called post-romantic, according to Sanacja regime advocates) tradition of political irrationalism, whether that involved lofty rhetoric or common lies.

Irzykowski did not sit at home during the siege of Warsaw. He moved from place to place looking (as many Varsovians were) for the best shelter from the bombing. He spent the last days of the siege in the Sejm (Polish parliament) building on Wiejska Street, which is where he survived the bombing of 25 September, which lasted all day and forced the last defenders of the city to capitulate. Called “black Monday,” “bloody Monday,” and even “lany poniedziałek,” this day has been well documented; it is described in primary sources, in testimonies written during the siege by those who survived this traumatic experience, in countless memoirs, diaries and journals. Irzykowski returned to a discussion of this event more than once, though he concentrated not so much on descriptions or accounts as he did on evaluation and interpretation. He attempted to subject what happened to rational evaluation. He asked whether the bombardment, during which his apartment and his beloved personal library burned, could have been avoided. He reflected on the effects of the material destruction. He

\begin{footnotes}
\item[180] Translator’s note: A klerk is an intellectual or artist who avoids politics and engagement in political conflict. Klerkizm is a philosophy or world view that guides an intellectual or artist in this form of (for want of a better word) “escapism.” A klerk is perhaps best understood as an “ivory tower intellectual.”
\item[181] Entry dated 15 November 1939. Irzykowski is quoted from his Pisma, 434.
\end{footnotes}
examined the military, political and moral effects of the air attacks that had caused death and destruction on such a scale.

Irzykowski’s entry dated 3 October 1939 begins with a shocking accusation. Granted, the writer was quoting here an opinion that he had heard, but it serves as a point of departure for his later reflections, in which we find similarly harsh words.

F. S[zyfmanówna] said that Starz[yński]’s actions - refusing to surrender the city – was a “crime,” because it led inevitably to the fiery Monday that the Germans had forecast, during which our home was burned down. Rómmel wanted to give up, pointing to the lack of ammunition, but St[arzyński] wanted to be the hero in the name of the city. Who would settle this matter? [...] Undoubtedly, W[arsaw] took on an honorable wound. Today W[arsaw] is the most wonderful demolished city in Europe, a model of the modern destroyed city, maybe even Madrid will step aside for her [Warsaw], the president could show it to tourists for money with the proceeds going to the city’s poor.\footnote{182}

The meaning of the phrase “honorable wound” is ambivalent. On the one hand, it contains a certain irony alongside such other phrases as “most wonderful demolished city,” which the mayor could show “to tourists for money.” On the other hand, it retains within itself something that is highly serious. At the same time, one can hear in the above passage an alien voice. The imagery of a wound inflicted on Warsaw does not fit with Irzykowski’s language in that such imagery conjures up the heroic-martyrological pattern of speaking. Very early, the writer was aware of the fact that the defense of Warsaw had no real chance for success. On 12 September – that is, around a week before news arrived that the Red Army had attacked Poland from the east – Irzykowski noted: “Early in the morning I told someone: the war is over, and now I would add: there is only execution.”\footnote{183} Once the execution had been carried out, he returned, on 5 October, to the matter of the bombardment, stating:

\begin{quote}
Not Rómmel, but Starzyński wanted the bombardment of W[arsaw]. It would have been worth fighting, even being buried, had it had an effect on the frontline battle, had it brought some relief, but it didn’t.\footnote{184}
\end{quote}

Here, the mayor of Warsaw emerges not just as a hero at someone else’s expense, but also as self-taught strategist.

The comparison of Warsaw in September 1939 with Madrid, besieged by the Francoists during the Spanish Civil War, appears in Irzykowski’s text three times,

\footnote{182}{Ibid., 363}
\footnote{183}{Ibid., 322.}
\footnote{184}{Ibid., 372.}
and it occurred to others as well. In his radio address on the first day of the war, Colonel Umiastowski mentioned the Spanish capital:

A great city like Madrid was under fire from General Franco’s units for more than two years. The city of Madrid was destroyed to such an extent that literally, in many districts, not a single building remained whole, despite the fact that, throughout the siege, inhabitants were living there, working there, and above all fighting there. And while other fronts collapsed, the huge city of Madrid held out till the end. Here we have the example of the martyrdom of the Spanish, which is not at all greater than that of the Poles.\textsuperscript{185}

There is something a bit strange about the chief propagandist’s statement here, given that he seems to have anticipated, at the very start of the war, the complete destruction of Warsaw. This comparison with Madrid was apparently an attempt to show that a great city could hold out against a siege for a long time. At least it was with that intention that Starzyński used it on 10 September: “Well, well. They are bombing. We know from recent history that Madrid and Barcelona were besieged and bombed for years, but they nonetheless had to maintain a normal life.”\textsuperscript{186} Characteristically, the most competent person in this subject, Wacław Lipiński (a military historian and director of the Józef Piłsudski Institute for Research in the Modern History of Poland), who often integrated into his radio addresses historical comparisons, did not refer to the example of Madrid.

Just after the war, General Tadeusz Kutrzeba, who along with the remainder of the Poznań Army broke through to Warsaw after the lost Battle of the Bzura, pointed out the erroneous nature of the Madrid comparison. What is important to me about Kutrzeba’s stance is not so much his military-historical argumentation, as much as its moral dimension. Analyzing the defense of Warsaw from an operational point of view, Kutrzeba reckoned, as early as 10 September, with the possibility that Poland would have to capitulate. After the Battle of the Bzura had ended (18–20 September), no Polish army was functioning in any organized fashion, the High Command had left Polish territory, and the Soviets – having crossed into Poland – were moving westward. Warsaw had become a self-contained area of operation. The German advantage in terms of weaponry, including artillery and aircraft, was obvious. Warsaw would be able to “defend” (bronić) itself for some time longer, but – Kutrzeba emphasized – it could not “save” (obronić) itself. Beyond that: the Germans were systematically destroying the city with artillery fire and from the air, practically without suffering losses.

\textsuperscript{185} Quote from M. J. Kwiatkowski, op. cit., 55.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 121.
themselves. “So as Warsaw […] was bleeding, as its defenders persisted within walls, protected against tanks, the Germans were losing no blood, only time. And they had plenty of that.” Such was the general’s conclusion, who knew – after all – what the situation on the Western Front looked like after the English and French declared war on Hitler. It was clear, that continued defense “cannot provide any operational results. It can only provide benefits that are moral in nature, which could pay off in the future.” Thus, the issue here was whether or not to allow further death and destruction for the sake of “moral benefit.”

General Rómmel, who arrived in Warsaw on 8 September with part of his broken Łódź Army, received on that day orders from the Commander-in-Chief in Brest to take over the defense of Warsaw, “as long as ammunition and food hold out.” As commander of the newly created Warsaw Army, he issued a proclamation in which he communicated the contents of his orders and called for the continued defense of Warsaw, which was “tied to the honor of Poland.” After the war, General Rómmel’s chief of staff, Colonel Aleksander Pragłowski, assessed his commander in this way: “In carrying out his mission, he was rigid like an obelisk, focused on the vision of national honor that had been placed in his hands.” But Pragłowski was critical of the Marshal of Poland (1936–1941) and Commander-in-Chief of Poland’s armed forces, Edward Rydz-Śmigły:

> Our nation has sometimes suffered defeat, but it has always fought to the end in order to preserve the soldier’s honor. A commander who orders that the capital of his own country be burned to the ground should himself be a shining example of sacrificial bravery.

On 23 September, General Rómmel rejected the arguments regarding capitulation presented by General Kutrzeba; he invoked the orders he had received from the Commander-in-Chief along with the example of Madrid, which was supposed to show that a city in ruins could be defended for months. Kutrzeba, one of the best trained of all Polish high commanders, knew perfectly well that the Madrid-Warsaw comparison was groundless. Madrid, defended by Republican

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188 Ibid.
forces since 1936, had never been completely encircled, and its inhabitants had thus been able to leave the city. But in the case of Warsaw, the Germans closed the ring around Warsaw on 15 September. The battle for Madrid had been carried out with varying intensity with long breaks, and the city had finally capitulated in March 1939 as a result of treason and demoralization within the Republican ranks. After the bombardment of Warsaw on 25 September, the idea of capitulation began to ripen. At a meeting called by General Römmel for the next day, General Kutrzeba – according to the account provided by Colonel Tomaszewski – came out firmly in favor of surrendering the city: “Warsaw has carried out its ordered task fully […], and further resistance would represent unjustified suicide, the unnecessary murder of the population, the destruction of the city.”

Irzykowski also rejected the significance of the Madrid comparison: some people “wanted to imitate Madrid – always some kind of template, some foreign model (the Polish Bayreuth, Polish Hitlerism).” A few days later, he was more pointed in his disagreement, and he punctuated his statement with an iconoclastic point:

In Lauterbach’s opinion, the comparison between Warszawa and Madrid is not very precise. The bombardment of Madrid involved only certain neighborhoods, the force strengths of the two sides were almost equal, and Madrid had a connection with Barcelona. From abroad the decision to allow the bombardment of Warszawa must appear not heroic, but absurd.

We find a polar opposite estimate in the memoirs of the chief of staff for the Command of the Defense of Warsaw, Colonel Tadeusz Tomaszewski. Years after the fact, commenting on German General Johannes Blaskowitz’s demand that the capitulation document contain the term “Fortress Warszawa” (a demand that Kutrzeba, who was to sign the capitulation, protested), Tomaszewski admitted:

Personally, I cannot deny that Gen. Blaskowitz was correct. Though it was a free city, Warsaw in fact became a powerful fortress thanks to its people, who remained faithful to the idea we sang in “Rota”, that “for us every doorstep will be a fortress.” Warsaw took this idea literally; they were not words spoken at some holiday mass or a gala affair. It was the first to understand the totality of modern warfare, and this totality was

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191 T. Tomaszewski, op. cit., 129.
192 K. Irzykowski, op. cit., 372.
193 Ibid., 388.
194 Translator’s note: “Rota” (Oath) is a patriotic poem written by Maria Konopnicka in 1908 and set to music in 1910.
subordinated to action. Various Maginot Lines, Westwalls, Atlantic Walls and forts like Fort Emmanuel, have fallen like a house of cards, and free cities transformed themselves into fortresses, like Madrid and Stalingrad. Warsaw, too, was a fortress.\textsuperscript{195}

Irzykowski’s conclusion (not heroic, but absurd), when confronted by the above line from “Rota,” reveals what is the fundamental ideational conflict here. Irzykowski turned the entire heroic-martyrological order of values on its head. One can detect this confrontation in the reinterpretation of the main motifs of the September discourse, such as calls for romantic, patriotic radicalism and the defense of honor.

In entries dated 3 October and 15 November, Irzykowski reconstructed a kind of political-moral strategy behind the decision to extend the defense of Warsaw.

Warsaw is supposed to be a twinge of conscience for Western Europe, a kind of bill of exchange, which it must-should pay with usury. Which means Poland’s (military) honor has been saved, its reputation, its knightly tradition.\textsuperscript{196}

Irzykowski confronted this position from two perspectives: its political effectiveness and its ethics. “Will Europe take note?”\textsuperscript{197} The writer doubted that it would, and six weeks later he formulated the following accusation:

Nonetheless, those two or three days of bombing (25 September), for which Czuma, Römmel and Starzyński are culpable, were a crime. Not in the first instance, but on appeal. Warsaw and Poland’s honor was saved, supposedly, England was handed a large honorary debt, we have in our hands a bill of exchange. But in the second instance, this is blackmail, the English have been cheated, and though they see through it, they accept the bill of exchange.\textsuperscript{198}

Honor is a value in and of itself, Irzykowski argued, referring to Schopenhauer, and it has nothing in common with the contrivance of a situation marked by moral blackmail. Honorable sacrifice is selfless, and in what happened in Warsaw there was something of a “desire to impress, even in poverty.” To ourselves, as Poles, we are noble knights, dying under the rubble in defense of honor. But to Europe, which “acknowledges receipt and has approved,” but which “has a lot of its own matters and new heroes,” we reveal our “frivolity, childishness, truculence, lack of organization, of foresight.”\textsuperscript{199}

\textsuperscript{195} T. Tomaszewski, op. cit., 131.
\textsuperscript{196} K. Irzykowski, op. cit., 363.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid., 433-434.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid., 363-364.
Irzykowski did not retreat from repudiating that which was most sacred about the Warsaw September, from discrediting the meaning of everything connected with the notion of redeemed blood and with the rubble of the defense of the capital. He struck at the solar plexus of the heroic city and its heroic mayor: “W[arsaw] was fighting for its honor? Rodomontade, at which Europe laughs.” More than the pride that comes with rescued honor, the legacy of the September campaign is the bitter taste of disgrace and squandered military sacrifice.

It is not that P[oland] lost the war against H[itler], which is terrible, but that it lost in such a disgraceful way, shamelessly exposing our inadequacies. (Soldiers were lying in trenches under a hail of bullets and grenades, they couldn't see their own officers, let alone those in the higher ranks).

He also metes out irony toward the meaning of the sacrifice made by the capital and its inhabitants during the siege. Such sacrifice was not fully executed because declarations of sacrifice deviated from real practice and revealed themselves once again as pretense. Since the heroic defense of the city was supposed to show the extreme determination of Poles, then:

Starzyński should have consequently buried himself with the entire city – not just metaphorically, but also personally and physically – should have let it develop to that which to the Germans later posed a threat: gas and bacteria. […] so that Poland's stance would reach the summit of steadfastness, a historical memorial, though without the immediate practical consequences, but the horror and admiration would spread throughout all Europe […]. I don't hold it against him, being no hero myself […], I do not condemn others. But in the end, that Monday, on Poland's part, was also a bluff, like the entire statement on the matter of Gdańsk.

If one took the concept of the defense of Warsaw as heroic sacrifice to its logical extreme, as Irzykowski seemed to view it, then everyone would die under the rubble and experience total destruction. Only then would they triumph spiritually in the empty landscape of annihilation.

200 Ibid., 372.
201 Ibid., 377.
202 Ibid., 363-364.
203 Such a vision was not just a fantastic dream; it also reflected the real state of social consciousness, as evidenced by an article from the underground publication Znak, dated May 1940, in which the author mentioned his conversations with Varsovians in September 1939: “I do not know whether I was just lucky to meet people as cut by Phidias, or by a tailor, but as God is in heaven, all those whom I was able to figure out told me they were ready to bury themselves under the rubble of the city, rather than let in the Germans.” Quote from A. K. Kunert, op. cit.
The effect of the prolonged defense of the city was its destruction. To many, that was proof of the greatest heroism, and the most valuable deposit on the future that Poland could convey to the world. But to Irzykowski, it was not just “criminal” and “absurd,” but also “moral blackmail.” In his “contemplative diary after defeat,” written in the winter of 1939/1940, Kazimierz Wyka applied a diagnosis which was equally harsh, but which was to have incomparably greater historiosophical momentum. The “superhuman heroism” of soldiers and civilians was suspended, so to speak, in a vacuum, and beyond that – it was wasted in chaos, improvisation and mess – that “eternal Polish patchwork.” But, Wyka wrote, in the heroic defense of Warsaw “there was […] something preposterous, I dare say unnecessary,” and, much like Irzykowski, he reconstructed with sarcasm the strategy by which the spectacle and moral blackmail played themselves out toward the world.

Graceful foreign words of praise, words one sends to people standing on lost battlegrounds, persisting in despair, which anyway will be broken, words, telegrams from mayors, admiration dripping from the speakers irritated rather than stimulated. Again they admire us for some sort of [Battle of] Somosierra, again with our participation condescending praise lent to the reckless and stubborn, again the final and hopeless outburst is supposed to redeem incompetence and the mistaken whole.204

With his critical judgment, Irzykowski did not accept the logic of the national sacrifice offered at the altar of the Motherland. He included the defense of Warsaw on a short list of “luminous pluses” associated with the September campaign (again there is veiled irony here, when we read, for example, about “efektowna kanonada” – that is, attractive or eye-catching cannonade205), but he subjected the matter to cold calculation, and he evaluated it from the pragmatic perspective of future underground activities in occupied Poland.

Starzyński should not have allowed the bombardment of W[arsaw] to happen precisely because W[arsaw], still well-off and not yet destroyed, would have been a more comfortable place for underground work than a poor city that was busy with its own vegetation.206

204 K. Wyka, Życie na niby. Pamiętnik po klęsce (Kraków 1984), 230-231. It is hardly necessary to add that Irzykowski and Wyka’s stance was isolated. W. Ligęza wrote: “In poetry abroad, the significance of the heroic defense of Warsaw in September 1939, a defense understood as an example for Europe, is very clearly emphasized.” He added: “The city’s martyrdom is supposed to have shocked foreign consciences, shamed politicians.” See W. Ligęza, op. cit., 31.


206 Ibid., 388.
Warsaw found itself in a situation in which its residents, along with the military, were on the very front line. Irzykowski did not deny the personal bravery and rectitude of Stefan Starzyński. He only wanted to refrain from accepting the radical message of “Warszawianka,” which was that today – for everyone caught within the wall of the city – it was about “your triumph or your death.” The obligation raised in the song has a dimension that is absolute and final. What was thus involved in Irzykowski’s words was a refusal to accept the moral coercion that ordered every civilian to become a soldier.

This attitude was developed significantly by one of the great diarists of the Warsaw Ghetto, Chaim A. Kaplan, who described the day-to-day events of the September siege. Indeed, Kaplan manifestly disagreed with the imposed transformation of civilians into soldiers, and protested against it. On 28 September, he wrote that General Czuma had ordered every citizen to defend the city, without asking for their consent.

During a war the civilian citizens are in the category of dumb sheep. They are filled to overflowing with false patriotism, compelled to obey every word that comes out of the commanders’ mouths, and the commanders regard thousands of lives as nothing when compared to a little military prestige. And here lies the root of our catastrophe. Military leaders changed Warsaw, which was full of unarmed civilians, into a fortress. Hitler thus treated the city like a military object and, with premeditation, ordered its destruction. These notions took on an existential dimension in the entry Kaplan registered two days later. Here, the repudiation of the universal call to battle, in the spirit of radical romantic patriotism, sounds firm and sharp, stated as it is not by an ideologue, but by a common person, full of fear and trembling in the face of death:

I never knew that the eyes of the whole world were upon me and that people marveled at my courage and wished me success. I was like a broken vessel - motivated by fear and genuine cowardice. I sat, shrunken and shriveled, in a dank cellar, overcome with fear and trembling at the terror of the bombs. Römmel and Starzyński suddenly made a “military hero” out of me! It is entirely understandable that the tones of “Warszawianka” did not speak to a Jewish intellectual with Zionist tendencies while trying to survive the siege of the capital. But Irzykowski manifestly rejected the model of patriotism engineered by songs tied to the November Uprising. Take, for example, his attitude toward

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208 Ibid., 39-41.
the mass action to dig anti-aircraft trenches and build barricades in the city’s streets, actions that reminded the writer of the insurrections of the previous century. This appeal, which sounded reasonable at the start, given how the military situation was developing, began to take forms that tended toward the grotesque: from anti-aircraft shelters to raising barricades and . . . positioning your weapons sharp side up (as if they were war scythes).

On 24 September 1939 president Starzyński issued a proclamation to the people of Warsaw, in which we read:

It is our duty to prepare ourselves for a situation in which the state and the nation's capital are threatened. Therefore, it is imperative now to prepare a suitable number of shelters. [...] All good citizens of the capital are obliged to join this work. Most desired - to report along with a shovel.209

The response was immediate and huge, and the digging itself was carried out in a fully egalitarian atmosphere. On 28 August, Goniec Warszawski wrote enthusiastically: “Workers and intellectuals, gentlemen in gloves and craftsmen,” and it went on to declare that “Warsaw should have 125 kilometers of trenches capable of sheltering 300 thousand people.”210 On the day war broke out the appeal was renewed, which was picked up by various social and veterans organizations, including Związek Żydów Uczestników Walk o Niepodległość Polski (Union of Jews Participating in Battles for the Independence of Poland) in the pages of Nasz Przegląd. On the night of 6/7 September, in an atmosphere of panic surrounding the evacuation of Warsaw and the government’s departure from the city, around 100 thousand men got to work building barricades, fortifications and anti-aircraft trenches.211 The next day, in a special proclamation, the Commander of the Defense of Warsaw, General Czuma, called on Varsovians to defend the capital city and thanked all those residents who had reported for work digging trenches. “And you should keep going!”212 Poetic testimony to this public upsurge can be found in a verse written by Jerzy Jurandot, who not only spoke of Varsovians’ mass participation and their particular work (“many men and women and boys/barricades rise from the cobblestones,/made of old furniture, baby carriages, mattresses”), but also pointed directly to the Polish uprising tradition, when it was Colonel Kiliński who, in the “days of the insurrection,” led

209 Quote from Cywilna obrona Warszawy we wrześniu 1939 r., 3.
210 Ibid., 5
211 See W. Bartoszewski, 1859 dni Warszawy (Kraków 1974), 30.
212 Quote from Cywilna obrona Warszawy we wrześniu 1939 r., 23.
the people of Warsaw “toward the Russian cannon.” On 7 September, Colonel Umiastowski delivered his final radio address, in which he called on the people of “every settlement, village, small town and city” to rise up in battle against German tanks. The instructions were simple:

[…] one must collect material to put up barricades, which must be built with heavy items, beating piles into the ground. In front of the barricade dig a trench with steep walls, with a depth of 2 meters, a width of 6 meters. A tank that falls into such a trench will get stuck with no way to get out. […] In front of the barricades, arrange a series, stretching hundreds of meters long, of harrows collected from the entire village, with blades pointed upward.

On 5 October 1939, as the German military was parading in front of Hitler down Aleje Ujazdowskie, one of Warsaw’s main thoroughfares, Irzykowski mocked the raising of barricades.

Czuma turned out to be a donkey, he built barricades as if it were the year 1831, or 1848 or 1871, but the G[ermans] said: We will not play this game because we have better toys. We hear nothing of Czuma anymore. We should put a harness on [the general] to repair the destroyed streets. First it was the Poles alone who destroyed W[arsaw] (600 barricades), they turned it upside down. This Polish destruction is more conspicuous to the passerby than the German destruction.

Irzykowski was not alone in his harsh judgment of the action to build barricades, which at the time was almost universally praised and put forward as an example of Varsovians’ patriotic attitude. He was preceded by the deputy commander for the defense of Warsaw, Brigadier general Julian Janowski, who recorded in his diary, written during the siege:

In response to Starzyński’s appeal, people actually got down to work and quickly raised barricades and trenches everywhere (mostly where they were not needed), causing congestion in the streets. Movement was blocked. At the barricades people used beds, cabinets, tables, and even sheets, thrown directly out of windows. All these materials were flammable. Soldiers had to take up thankless and unfulfilling work – to dismantle not just unnecessary but burdensome barricades and clear away barriers, again to the dismay of the population, who had worked so hard for nothing, and saw how their work was being destroyed.

214 Quote from M. J. Kwiatkowski, op. cit., 90-91.  
216 J. Janowski, “Dziennik zastępcy dowodcy obrony Warszawy w 1939 roku.” Quote from Obrona Warszawy 1939 we wspomnieniach, op. cit., 149-150.
The quadrille involving the barricades (build – destroy, dig up – bury) is an example of the chaos that surrounded those September days, which was something that could be controlled, as evidenced by the actions taken by mayor Starzyński as head of the civil defense of Warsaw. What was significantly more difficult to control was the communications chaos and – to use a delicate term – the information policy consciously pursued by Polish authorities, all of which was tied to misguided military decisions, and which, in the end, led to catastrophic results. Irzykowski spoke about these matters bluntly, writing that “the government cheated us utterly. You can lose a war, that’s a natural disaster, like a flood. But they shouldn’t incite and lie.”

Two things were involved here: an assessment of pre-September Poland and the Polish government’s ongoing propaganda strategy.

Irzykowski stated bitterly that “for years in Poland, the habit of consciously using lies has taken root, under the guise of a myth – legend, the most fashionable words.” The writer’s belief that Sanacja governments had employed a program of lies in the public discourse as a way to build national identity was one that was shared by other witnesses to the September defeat as well. In his *Kronika lat wojny i okupacji* (Chronicle of the war and occupation years), Ludwik Landau took note of the mood of Varsovians, who on 30 September got their first glimpse of German soldiers on the streets of their ruined city:

> At that moment the people understood one thing – perhaps felt is a better word than understood – how they had been constantly cheated, lied to, how little those in governing circles cared about the people’s fate, those who acted with such disregard, with such self-certainty.

In his *Pamiętnik po klęsce* (Diary after defeat), written in the first winter of the occupation, Kazimierz Wyka asked the question: “How could one go on, with impunity, without recognizing reality, lying to oneself, in a state of such self-admiration.” In his essay “Dwie jesienie” (Two autumns, 1946), Wyka analyzed the September shock methodically. The military defeat, which given realities at the time could not have been avoided, became an ideational defeat in that it laid bare – so to speak – the lies that had underpinned the Sanacja regime: the strength of the army and the genius of the Commander-in-Chief turned out to

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218 Ibid.
220 K. Wyka, op. cit., 226.
be a “common bluff.” The Polish state, built on such a foundation over the course of twenty years, had fallen like a house of cards.

The camp of politicians in uniform based their very political and social existence on the uniform. So, the basis for trust in the governing camp, which had been forced upon society (indeed upon more than one society), turned out to be based on blindness, lies and recklessness. Which is why, in the September conditions, a strike at the uniform had to become, and did become, something that spread throughout the entire pre-September past.

The master of the propaganda ceremony in the first days of the September campaign, Colonel Umiastowski, intentionally hid the real situation on the front from the Polish people. It was his obsession to prevent defeatism from spreading among the citizenry; to this end, Varsovians needed to be vigilant, saboteurs needed to be tracked down, and military realities needed to be embellished. The most fantastic stories were circulating throughout Warsaw, about allied forces landing in Gdańsk, about German cities being bombed.221 Having been scolded by Colonel Tomaszewski, Czuma’s chief of staff, for following a propaganda line that actually disarmed the civilian population of Warsaw, cutting them off from reliable information, Umiastowski agreed that “the truth must be told,” and after a few hours he delivered his stupidest and most pernicious address, calling on Varsovians to leave the city immediately. But the excessively optimistic propaganda continued. For example, on 14 September Captain (pilot) Władisław Polesiński delivered a radio talk under the title “A German soldier as seen up close.” The speaker offered listeners an encouraging portrayal of the military situation: the German Siegfried line had been broken during a daring attack by French tanks; giant benzene containers were burning in Cologne; Hitler was trembling in the face of English and French power; and the German soldiers were adolescents drunk on vodka and ether who would flee from any large attack.222

221 For example, W. Sieroszewski wrote in his diary under the date 8 September 1939 that “France has broken through the Siegfried line, a 200-kilometer front across Germany. The English are bombing Berlin, German ports and Hanover. But Poles were the first to bomb Berlin […] From Germany there is news of disturbances in Berlin, Essen and other places.” W. Sieroszewski, Dziennik (29.11.1938- 31.12.1939), prepared by A. Lam, in Sieroszewski, Dzieła, vol. XX, part 2: Varia (Kraków 1966), 108-109; L. Landau: “On the first day - I think emerging from a certain center of ‘rising spirits’ – rumors circulated about the seizure of Gdańsk by the Polish army, about the bombing of Hamburg by the English fleet, and of Berlin by combined English, French and Polish squadrons. Quickly, however, it turned out that these rumors were completely false […]” L. Landau, op. cit., 4.

222 See M. J. Kwiatkowski, op. cit., 181.
Civilians as well as soldiers were deceived. General Kutrzeba recalled: “The news we were hearing during the Battle of the Bzura that Allied forces were landing in Gdańsk […] turned out to be either propaganda or stale facts.”

The bitter taste of these lies accompanied Irzykowski until his death. The lies of his own people – for him, that was the most painful experience of the September campaign. In the fourth year of the occupation, on 16 March 1942, he noted: “September 1939. But what is most lodged in my memory is not the thunderbolts, not the ruins, but the lies of our government and the lies of the rumormongers, most likely official.”

The last entry in Irzykowski’s diary is dated 7 August 1944, and was written in Ochota, a city district on fire during the Warsaw Uprising. In that entry, we find this sentence: “Before anything happens, they will burn W[arsaw] (by which I mean me – a moral pars pro toto) down to the ground.”

Injured in the leg, having been transported to a hospital in Milanówek, Irzykowski died in Żyrardów on 2 November 1944.

In answering a question that many people were asking in those days, namely who bore responsibility for the September defeat, Irzykowski searched within himself and within society. Yes, we were cheated, but should we have allowed ourselves to be so cheated? Is it not also the case that we allowed ourselves to be deluded, that we were too easily satisfied by nice-sounding words, by rose-colored appearances?

But is not the nation itself – and thus, am not I - guilty of allowing such governments to rule, that everything would break apart right away? […] Can the nation control this? After all, military matters must be a secret […]. But the nation is responsible for choosing the people whom we want to trust. And here is the guilt, here is the psychology and characterology. […] So, are we not ourselves guilty? People still said: the military is untouchable, we have a top notch military, the military is our pride, the only bright spot in our national life, etc. Did they have in mind the common soldier, or the officers and above, or both? Let us stop with this talk, it is enough that the army failed. The average person, or even one who is more glorious, in any case a civilian, is not at fault, he could not even flee […]. He was blackmailed into thinking he had to be enthralled by faith in the military, otherwise he is not a good patriot. When the war came, this faith crumbled, suddenly, it unraveled from the inside. The wall, beyond which the citizen was not allowed to look, collapsed.

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223 T. Kutrzeba, op. cit., 345.
224 K. Irzykowski, op. cit., 539.
225 Ibid., 613.
226 Ibid., 388-390.
Starzyński entered the pantheon of national heroes as the fearless defender of Warsaw, who refused to run from the enemy, who remained in the German-occupied city until the end. One-hundred-twenty-six years after the “Battle of the Nations,” Starzyński repeated the grand gesture made by Prince Józef Poniatowski at Leipzig, and could well have repeated the prince’s very words: “God entrusted me with the honor of the Polish people, and I shall simply return it to him.” Thirty-five years after Stefan Starzyński was arrested, at a plaque placed at Warsaw’s Powązki Cemetery in the mayor’s memory, Father Jan Zieja said:

In some ways, his words – I will not abandon my position, I will not step down from the position entrusted in me – draw upon those words uttered in the autumn fog on the plain of Leipzig, enveloped in the smoke of gunfire.²²⁷

General Stefan Grot-Rowecki made a similar moral choice when he decided to remain in occupied Warsaw despite London’s suggestions that, because he had been exposed, he make his way to England. The general’s brother, Stanisław Rowecki, who – on the first anniversary of the outbreak of war – had given his brother a bronze statue of Prince Józef Poniatowski, recalled a conversation they had at the end of 1942 or beginning of 1943, in which General Grot said:

I will not abandon my soldiers, who are vulnerable at every moment, as am I, to capture by the Germans, torture and death. [...] And do you know what, among other things, convinced me to not give up my position as AK [Armia Krajowa, Home Army] Commander? Your Prince Józef.²²⁸

Starzyński appeared to have found peace in defeat, which was a triumph. He knew that the highest and greatest values were burning in the fires of Warsaw. Irzykowski turned that way of thinking inside out. War laid bare the weakness of the Polish ship of state and the hollowness of its ideational construction. We, the defeated, experienced great disillusionment, one would like to say – we opened our eyes. The (wonderful) truth about the (wonderful) soul of the nation and its spiritual strength did not reveal itself to us. Rather, it was quite the opposite: “this faith crumbled, the “wall collapsed.” For Irzykowski, it was not a diamond (as it was in Norwid’s work) that burned in the fires of bombed-out Warsaw. In the end, all that was left were ashes.

²²⁷ Quote from Archiwum Prezydenta Warszawy Stefana Starzyńskiego, op. cit., 355.
²²⁸ Quote from M. Janion, Płacz generala. Eseje o wojnie (Warszawa 1998), 164.
Divided City

Does something exist that one might call a “totalitarian city”? When talking about totalitarianism, can we imagine its urbanistic equivalent – the totalitarian organization of urban space or, to put it another way, space subjected to totalitarian pressure?

Let us draw some preliminary distinctions. It seems that there exist two polar opposite manifestations of the “totalitarian city.” The architecture and “urbanism” of the totalitarian utopia (Fascist Italy, the Third Reich, Soviet social realism and its implants in satellite states) led to an at least partial implementation of urban concepts embodying utopian ideals, living spaces designed for the new collective man, the urbanistic shape that the rulers and ruled were to assume.\(^{229}\) I would also place in this category a kind of virtual urbanism of the totalitarian utopia, among which was the work of urbanists from Würzburg entitled “Die neue deutsche Stadt Warschau” from 1940 (known hitherto incorrectly as the Pabst Plan). Among other things, this plan called for a drastically smaller Warsaw, both in terms of area and in terms of population. Warsaw would be reduced in rank to a stopping-point city on the road to the East. The city’s traditional urban arrangement would be destroyed and transformed into a pseudo-medieval “Germanic” array of narrow streets intersecting with strategic highways. Friedrich Pabst himself appeared in Warsaw only in 1942. Above all, his work involved the design of the Volkshalle, an enormous domed building that was supposed to stand in place of the Royal Castle.\(^{230}\) This category also includes a project to build a gigantic park on the territory of the former Warsaw Ghetto,\(^{231}\) along with plans (recently uncovered) made by the Berlin architecture Hans Strosberg to turn Auschwitz,


\(^{230}\) For the most complete information on the urbanism of the German occupiers, see N. Gutschow and B. Klain, \textit{Zagłada i utopia. Urbanistyka Warszawy w latach 1939-1945} (Warszawa 1995).

\(^{231}\) In July 1943, after the liquidation of the ghetto, a concentration camp was established in this area, whose prisoners recovered bricks, scrap and other materials from the rubble. They also prepared the terrain for a future park. This idea originated with General Stroop. Plans and cost estimates were developed by SS-Gruppenführer, General Waffen SS, and engineer H. Kammler. See B. Kopka, \textit{Konzentrationslager Warschau. Historia i następstwa} (Warszawa 2007).
after military victory had been achieved, into a model Nazi city and a bastion of German culture in the East. All of these examples make up the – so to speak – positive pole of the realization of the “totalitarian city,” the pole that will not be a focus of this book.

But there is, after all, the negative pole – ways of shaping space occupied by “Untermenschen,” or the existence of spaces that are specially intended for them. As seen from this perspective, the project of the “totalitarian city” would constitute a distinctively organized urban space, or rather a quasi-urban space, whose function, in its first phase, would amount to the assignation of spheres for residence and employment, and even for approved forms of entertainment, to create the appearance of normality. Over time, concentration in a designated and isolated space, along with repression and exploitation, would intensify, leading first to movement from the phase of “city” into that of “closed residential quarter” (that is, a ghetto), and then into that of the “concentration camp.” The final destination would be the “extermination camp.” Of course, this is not a chronological order, but rather a typological order.

No doubt, the culmination of space subjected to totalitarian pressure is the concentration camp, which – as Primo Levi wrote – “on a smaller scale but with amplified characteristics, reproduced the hierarchical structure of the totalitarian state […].” The camp at Auschwitz was broken down into distinct sub-camps – “city-states of a sort, divided by borders whose crossing was prohibited. […] The sub-camp appeared like a large city cut through with a main artery and side streets.” The extermination camp no longer contains even the most repressively organized “living space,” or rather, such living space has been marginalized and reduced to the absolute minimum; it consists of room for the Sonderkommandos. But the center of the extermination camp consists of “space for killing and utilization.” The extermination camp thus loses all the appearance of a “city,” and takes on the look of a “machine,” an “enterprise,” a “production line.”


In this section, I will more closely examine the early phase of the “totalitarian city,” one that has both a peculiar and one-of-a-kind character, namely the ghetto and its predicament within the confines of an occupied city. My goal here is not so much to reconstruct an image of Warsaw at that time – in a way that Tomasz Szarota most thoroughly did – as to provide an interpretation of this image, or rather images, registered in texts, indeed personal documents, originating from the period of occupation. In a few instances, I also refer to memoirs written after the war.

In medieval Europe it was common for Jews to be concentrated in designated parts of a city, a situation marked by two tendencies: external force and internal choice. The doctrine of segregation (a prohibition on Christians and Jews living together, which took its final form after the Third Council of the Lateran in 1179) evolved toward a doctrine of isolation (special markings for Jews, concentrating them in separate districts). The wave of persecution during the Crusades, attempts to preserve religious and cultural differences, an attitude of internal solidarity among the persecuted and humiliated, practical considerations of self-defense and renewed external pressures – all of these phenomena induced Jews to live together in distinct spaces. They thus gathered in a separate part of a city and turned it into their sphere of their social, cultural and religious activity. But there are fundamental differences between a Jewish living space so defined and a ghetto. First, the former was an area of voluntary settlement; life in the group was not dictated by necessity. And second, it was an area in which final segregation and isolation had not yet take place, an area marked by continued exchange and meetings between Jews and non-Jews.

The first districts closed off by walls and designated for Jews emerged in the fifteenth century. But we should remember that they were not closed off in any absolute sense. There was pressure for Jews to live in the ghetto and to return there for the night. But the border – though fortified by a wall and guarded – could be crossed.

The word “ghetto” was used for the first time in 1516 in Venice. In the Venetian dialect, *Il geto* or *ghetto* means “foundry” (from *gettare* – to pour, cast).

The Ghetto Vecchio and Ghetto Nuovo served as the old foundry districts of Venice, far from the ceremonial center of the city; their manufacturing functions had shifted by 1500 to the Arsenal. The Ghetto Nuovo was a rhomboid piece of land surrounded on all sides by water; buildings created a wall all around its edges with an open space in the center. Only two bridges connected it to the rest of the urban fabric.235

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In Venice, natural conditions themselves worked perfectly together with the ghetto’s basic function: isolation and closure. At night, when the bridges were lifted and windows facing the canals were closed, the walls along the water looked like the inaccessible walls of a castle. In 1555, Pope Paul IV began construction of Rome’s ghetto walls differently than in Venice in the sense that the ghetto would be located in the very heart of the city, in a place that was highly visible between two Roman market areas. The Venice and Roman ghettos provide model examples of the emerging ghetto. We find that Warsaw followed a similar schema in the creation of its ghetto: a ruler’s decree ordered Jews to wear special markings; the division of the city into Jewish and non-Jewish spaces; massive resettlement and the construction of walls separating the ghetto from the rest of the city (for which the Jewish community had to pay); and a ban on Christian servants working in Jewish homes.

The Venetian ghetto, Sennett claims, was something of an “urban condom,” which was to protect the city from the Jew’s unclean body and his defiling touch. But the Roman ghetto was viewed as a space for missionary work; Jews were to be gathered in a single place so they could more easily be converted. In Venice the body was isolated, but in Rome the soul was “healed.” Nonetheless, one can detect here a certain common denominator in the arguments made in the creation of both ghettos, which involves the use of the metaphor of disease. For Venetians, the ghetto’s construction was a prophylactic action. For the Romans, it was a curative action.

The sanitary-epidemiological motivation was the argument that the Nazis most often used to justify the creation of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1940. The metaphor of disease was one of the constitutive features of the Nazi version of anti-Semitism. Susan Sontag wrote: “European Jewry was repeatedly analogized to syphilis, and to a cancer that must be excised,” but the decisive role in the creation of the ghetto was played by typhus – as a real epidemic threat, but above all as an ideological argument. The Germans often explained the construction of the ghetto as necessary in the battle against a typhus epidemic. But the ghetto that the Nazis created, despite the partially similar language employed as motivation and its external appearance (walls, its dense population, its tight space, its filth) differed fundamentally from the historical ghetto. It could be closed off forever, its isolation could be absolute. And the real goal of concentrating Jews in an area separate from the rest of the city was to set in motion the process of indirect extermination. The Germans created the ghetto not as a prophylactic,
not to cure, and not to convert. They created the ghetto not to carry out a policy of segregation and separation. They were interested in neither converting Jews nor sending them into exile. The ghetto was a vestibule for the Final Solution.  

Occupied Warsaw was a city divided in various ways and in different stages. The instrument in that division was use of the decree, by which a new spatial order, under new laws, was established. Before the Germans carried out the physical destruction of Warsaw, they first dismembered it through a series of such decrees, leading to something that one might call a “decreed space.” It was a way of organizing space in the totalitarian city: a spatial form for a new order that was arbitrary, did not take into account existing realities, was imposed by force, and was executed under the threat of the harshest kinds of repression. Everyone who still had a right to live had to accept it.

In 1940, the Germans worked out an all-encompassing plan for the division of Warsaw into three quarters: Jewish, Polish, and German. In March, authorities established a “Seuchensperrgebiet” (“Obszar zagrożony tyfusem,” Area under Typhus Threat), which indicated what would be the maximum reach of the future ghetto. On 12 September 1940, the contents of an order issued by Governor Ludwig Fischer were announced, through street megaphone, regarding the creation of three residential quarters – Jewish, Polish and German – and the definition of their borders. A wave of resettlement within the city, involving both Jews and Poles, reached its high point. The decision regarding the Jewish quarter was implemented by 15 November 1940, when the deadline for resettlement behind the ghetto walls had passed, and the ghetto was closed. Implementation of the decision to create the German quarter was delayed for the time being, though authorities referred often to this decision and issued appropriate declarations. As the war progressed, German officials no doubt were increasingly wary of concentrating too many of their countrymen in one area of the city; they could become the target of air attacks. At the same time, the Germans were feeling increasingly insecure within occupied Warsaw. In March 1942 the security police called on Germans to move to a designated part of the city, one that could be better

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protected. In August and September of that year, orders were issued that defined the borders of this area precisely, but only in February 1943 did Ludwig Leist (the Nazi-appointed administrator of Warsaw) sign the decree ordering Germans to resettle there by the end of May 1943. Those who moved into the quarter set aside for Germans did so reluctantly. The drawn out process of creating the German quarter ended only in the spring of 1944 in a way that was truly paradoxical. The Germans fenced off a small section of the city that had been marked off for them with barbed wire. They closed themselves off behind barbed wired and separated themselves from the rest. 238 The process of dividing the occupied city, which had started by walling off the ghetto, was finalized. The decreed space neared its completion.

We might add that, after the war, it was in Berlin were the madness of decreed space and the ideologically motivated division of the living fabric of a city was most spectacular. And it was there that we again see a kind of paradox. Berlin was divided into four sectors, and from 1961 to 1989 the western sector was closed, though it was the only free area on the territory of the German Democratic Republic. The communist rulers of East Germany ordered that West Berlin be wrapped by a wall to cut off access to it for East Berliners. But there was a second wall, one that surrounded the little town of Wandlitz, just outside of Berlin, which was set aside for party elites. The first wall was intended to keep residents of Berlin inside, as in a mouse trap. The second wall was intended to keep people out, far from the secrets held in the lair of the communist leadership. Berliners commonly called Wandlitz the “ghetto of the gods,” or simply the “ghetto.” 239

The culmination of the division of occupied Warsaw is undoubtedly a dichotomy: ghetto – Aryan side. This dichotomy represented not only what was probably the most characteristic feature of that divided urban space, but also a kind of spatial existence marked by the words “this side” and “that side,” and the axis of this space was a wall, which – so to speak – gave shape to the experience.

For ancient and medieval towns and cities, a wall was something absolutely fundamental; it was their basic quality, even their elementary definition. 240 It not only defined the borders of urban space and functioned as an instrument

240 According to the definition cited by Fernand Braudel from Antoine Furetière’s dictionary (1690), a town was the “home of a large number of people which is normally enclosed by walls.” See Braudel *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, Jacek Leociak - 9783631672747
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of defense, but it also served as a significant symbol. One might say that the wall made the area it encircled into a city; it gave the city its identity. In antiquity, the city wall divided the world into civilized space (intra muros) and that which was wild (extra muros). The circle of walls protected that space marked by law and order, organized in an urban structure, beyond which was endless backwoods populated by wild animals, bands of robbers, and enemy soldiers. The city-wilderness juxtaposition was one of the basic elements of the medieval imagination. “The ‘ring of stone’ was the ‘outward sign of a conscious effort for independence and freedom,’ which marked urban expansion in the Middle Ages.”

As a stigmata of a ghetto, at least in the early phase in which separate Jewish quarters were first taking shape, the wall still revealed a certain ambivalence in terms of its symbolic significance. We should remember – using the words of Fernand Braudel – that the sixteenth-century “ghetto may have been the prison within which the Jews were confined but it was also the citadel into which they withdrew to defend their faith and the continuity of the Talmud.” But the wall surrounding the ghetto in German-occupied Warsaw could only be a sign of enslavement, oppression and violence, division and separation, a sign that was deeply rooted in Jewish tradition, and thus easily recognized. Ludwik Landau recorded on 17 April 1940: “[…] the Jewish population of Warsaw watches with trepidation as walls rise up around their neighborhood. […] Varsovians are talking about these walls as if they portend a ghetto.”

To what extent were people aware that this ghetto would not be like the ones they knew from history?

What we have here is a situation in which a topographical experience is simultaneously an existential experience. Let us outline the two polar extremes of the experience thus understood. First, division and separation. And second, internalization.

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Such is the imagery conjured up in the memoirs of Adina Blady-Szwajger, who recalled a detail, a situational trifle, a fleeting moment drawn from the flood of events, but a moment that in fact takes on the significance of a universal symbol. In the sweltering heat of the day 30 July 1942, from a window of the hospital on the corner of Leszna and Żelazna Streets, the author observed a column of people being driven toward Umschlagplatz. They were walking along Żelazna, which was divided down the middle by the wall. To the east of the wall was the ghetto, to the west, the Aryan side. On Żelazna, across from the hospital window, there was a house:

On the balcony of [that] house […] – there on the other side [of the ghetto wall] – a woman in a flowered housecoat was watering plants in window boxes. She must have seen the procession below, but she carried on watering her flowers. And, on this side, they kept going past. They kept going past and there seemed to be no end.244

The woman looking through the window and the woman watering flowers on the balcony were separated by the distance of only the width of the street and sidewalk, a distance of no more than perhaps twenty meters. And yet they found themselves on opposite poles, sealed off from one another by a wall of air, divided and separate.

This division manifested itself most dramatically during the Ghetto Uprising, a subject that has been covered in a broad array of eye-witness accounts, poetry and prose. The symbolic image that established itself in the universal consciousness is that of the carousel at Krasiński Square. From among the various testimonies, let us chose two: first, the diary of Franciszek Wyszyński; and second, the diary of Maria Dąbrowska.245 Both texts present a stance toward the Ghetto Uprising that one might call “naoczność zewnętrzna” (external observation). The two diarists are on the outside, above all in the topographical sense; they are simply on the other side of the wall. They thus find themselves in the role of onlooker, though they each play this role in different ways. Wyszyński is an active and inquisitive observer. He fills the pages of his diary with detailed notes that fit under the headings: the “Jewish front,” the “battle with the Jews,” the “liquidation of the ghetto.” His entries from April and May 1943 are dominated by issues tied to the Uprising. The case of Dąbrowska and her diary (at least in its

245 Translator’s note: Maria Dąbrowska (1889-1965) was a writer famous in Poland above all for her 4-volume novel Noce i dnie (1931-1934).
print version) is something altogether different. This author is a passive observer; distant images get through to her, ambiguous news, all of which leaves behind, in her diary, a minimal imprint.

External observation also has a certain moral and existential value. Being on the outside means being situated beyond the boundaries of responsibility, but also beyond the confines of the experience of a fate that has ceased to be shared. Wyszyński’s diary reads like commentary; it reports gossip and rumors that are distinct from verified information and not based on the author’s own observation. The author provided different versions of news that had come to him, he made use of an expert’s military terminology. For example, having heard the sounds of gunfire coming from behind the walls, he tried to identify the kinds of weapons being used. His main point of observation was an apartment in the Warsaw district of Żoliborz. From the window he could see the burning ghetto; he counted the number of fires, he calculated the size of volleys. And though he found himself at least once in the direct vicinity of events and had views of the ghetto from Bonifraterska and Leszno Streets, his entire account is marked by a cool distance and dry matter-of-factness, by the sense of having a great distance, separation from that which was on the other side. The effect of this separation, one that is deeper than just topographic, is perhaps best reflected in the passage from 10 May 1943:

Today there were more explosions, and you could see fires. Are the Jews still defending themselves? Nobody knows. They say the Germans are blowing up the tall walls of burnt buildings, which would otherwise threaten to fall; but on the one hand, blowing up the walls cannot cause new fires, and on the other hand, above all, it would be necessary to demolish the high walls of the ghetto buildings on Bonifraterska Street in order to bring back the trams there, and the Germans are not doing this. According to another version, the Germans want to burn down and demolish the entire ghetto. It would be an irreparable loss for Warsaw, which has already triggered a huge spike in prices for buildings in anticipation of a great housing shortage after the war, while the existence of vacant houses in the Jewish quarter would give Warsaw, after the war, after renovation, an enormous supply of vacant dwellings.246

One might call such externality “technocratic” when everything but cool economic calculation disappears from the field of view.

In Dąbrowska’s diary, reflections on the Ghetto Uprising appear against the backdrop of the events of private life, eclipsed again and again by the diarist’s everyday activities. On 22 April:

246 F. Wyszyński, Dziennik z lat 1941-1944, eds. J. Grabowski and Z. R. Grabowski (Warszawa 2007), 364.
In the morning, I worked – then all three with Anna in the garden. Dinner with meat, joined at dinner by Jadzia, who tomorrow is going to Helena’s for the holidays. In the afternoon, I worked, tea in the evening at Anna’s. As we were in the garden, we saw clouds of smoke over the ghetto, where the battle apparently continues.247

Under the date 26 April, we find an entry about the weather:

On Holy Saturday there was wonderful summer weather – 20 degrees [Celsius]. Yesterday and today a little rain fell, but generally beautiful weather – sunny and spring-like - and outside the window a huge cloud of smoke still hangs over the ghetto. Once again, half of Warsaw is burning ....248

The next day Dąbrowska wrote:

A cloud of smoke is still visible through the window. Frightening – disturbing – terrible thoughts take control of the brain. Mrs. Leonard was here with her son. People exhaust me terribly. I cannot tolerate anyone longer than a half hour.249

And finally, the last entry, dated 12 May:

Today Basia Wolska came over and the whole image of Stasia’s death, reportedly a horrible death, came back to me with double force. In the morning we beat out some things and put them into anti-moth bags. Outside, cool but nice. The sun is ore-red from smoke. Constant explosions – as if it were a continued stage production of her death.250

In the last entry, echoes from the moribund Ghetto Uprising were associated with the memory of the death of a friend Stanisława (“Stasia”) Blumenfeld, a Jewish woman murdered by the Germans in Lwów. Anonymous mass death in the burning ghetto serves as the backdrop for an experience tied to the single death of an individual. Distant explosions and clouds of smoke on the horizon call to mind the horror of the death of someone close, valued and loved. In late April and early May 1943, Warsaw was the scene of a private drama, one involving personal loss. This would thus be private externality, an externality to everyday life, a little culinary, a bit social.

The breakup of Warsaw into ghetto and Aryan sides, that division of urban space, also provoked protest, a desire for the border’s removal, for the partition to be overcome. Just after the war, Kazimierz Brandys wrote (more as a declaration than an account):

248 Ibid.
249 Ibid., 396.
250 Ibid., 397.
The high gates of the ghetto closed behind the people of Leszno and Bonifraterska Streets. Let us not turn our backs on them, these walls should not separate our consciousnesses from them […] Snow falls on Gęsia Street just as it does on Krucza, Żurawia and Topiel Streets.²⁵¹

How drastic the breakup of the space of occupied Warsaw must have been, since the author – in order to question that breakup – drew upon a commonsense argument based on the universal laws of nature! Clearly, such an obvious fact was not universally accepted as obvious. During the Uprising, Brandys was moving through the streets outside the ghetto, separated, but with a sense of guilt:

I wanted to be close to them in those days, when I was overwhelmed with shame that I was not with them. […] The walls always blocked my path. […] I felt guilty because of the crowds gathered around a cinema or taking a walk on the [Ujazdów] Avenue, where boys were flirting with the girls.²⁵²

Writer and dramatist Zofia Nałkowska was also on the outside; she also viewed the Uprising from a distance with its flames, clouds of smoke, and explosions. But here, observation of the external symptoms of the Uprising did not end with the recording of superficial phenomena. It also led to internal reflection: on ways of experiencing brutal reality; on the paradox of proximity and distance in the face of tragedy; and – in a veiled way – on the fatal (in the sense of fate and doom) coincidence of two acts of genocide – the liquidation of the ghetto and the Katyń massacre, which had just been discovered.

Reality is tolerable because we are not given everything in the experience, not everything is visible. It comes to us in fractions of events, in shreds of the relationship, in the echoes of gunshots, terrible and untouchable - in the clouds of smoke, in fires, about which history says that they will be “reduced to rubble,” although no one understands these words. This reality, distant and happening behind the wall, is tolerable. But you cannot stand the thought. These are the graves that have undermined the old system of relations. We are stretched – we here - tightly along the axis of this symmetry. The fate of those people far away, the fate of these people near. They have died, they have died. Grave and serious marches of the resigned, leaping into flames, leaping into the abyss.²⁵³

Thought is organized around spatial images, which give shape to reflections offered in an Aesopian (as it were, encoded) language. In the above entry, spatial categories turn out to be categories of fate, torn between “here” and “there”;

²⁵² Ibid., 202.
between “near” and “far,” “behind the wall”; between the metaphorical abyss that divides the ghetto from the Aryan side; by the real distance that divides Katyń from Warsaw.

A record of the crumbs of information reaching Nałkowska about events playing out behind the wall becomes a dramatic record of the author’s own existential experience.

I live next to it, I can live! But in the end I feel unwell, I am changing into someone else. How is it that I can be forced into it, in order to be in it, in order to only live - stop! It is still a disgrace, not just a torment. This is terrible shame, not just compassion. Any effort to hold out, to not fall into madness, to maintain oneself in this horror, feels like guilt.  

Nałkowska was aware of the fact that something was happening here that – in a very deep sense – was also touching her, something that touched a person faced with the terrible “ordinariness” of the world:

Why am I so distressed, why am I ashamed to live, why can I not hold on? Is the world horrific? What is happening is in accordance with the rest of nature, it is animalistic – as goes the non-human world, so goes the world. […] Is the world horrific? The world is ordinary, one must suppose that. That is how the world is. The world is ordinary. The only strange thing about it is my own horror and the horror of others like me.  

Alicja Iwańska and Jan Gralewski – a married couple militarily active in occupied Warsaw – wrote short “letters/non-letters” to one another almost daily. In a note dated 12 May 1943, we have a description of the situation marked by separation:

The ghetto is burning […] constant explosions. And people are walking quietly along the streets full of sun and violets. Hearing the shots and explosions, no one even averts one's eyes.

The next note was written in the night of 12–13 May, just after a huge Soviet air raid on Warsaw:

Fires … Right now I do not believe in the existence of anything, beyond Warsaw, which is burning … I [Iwańska] went out on the balcony. A warm blast comes from the flames. One hears the crack and crash of walls, I feel it all in my chest: huge buildings collapsing. I am just a scaffold, but this scaffold is reinforced … I am calm now.

But later, the calm disappears, and sleeplessness appears. The entry dated 29 May:

254 Ibid., 446.
255 Ibid., 448.
257 Ibid.
I [Iwańska] have not been able to sleep the last couple days. I am filled with severe terror. I have within myself the entire net that has been thrown over the city. Tonight there were shots fired, and then some kind of explosion, then more shots.\textsuperscript{258}

In Iwańska’s epistolary notes from the period of the Ghetto Uprising we find not just a desire to overcome distance, but also a longing to unite the divided and separated spaces. Iwańska appears to think in holistic categories. For her (but not for others, as she pointed out in the entry dated 12 May, cited above), Warsaw was indivisible. The ghetto was burning from fires set by the Germans, and buildings were burning from Soviet bombs. And the entire terror was inside her. She thus carried out a peculiar act of incorporation, one involving divided space, a kind of internalization.

**Metaphors of the Ghetto**

The Nazi ghetto turned out to be something quite different than the historical ghetto, though the process by which people recognized this distinction was long (just as the process by which people grasped the horrible reality of the Holocaust was long). At the beginning, Warsaw Jews associated the ghetto above all with the painful history of persecution, and in this sense the ghetto – though it was the cause of great fear and anxiety – invoked a well-known version of the Jewish fate. Naomi Szac-Wajnkranc wrote about the clock having been turned back; she viewed the ghetto through the prism of what she had read about the Venetian ghetto: “dark, dirty alleys, dilapidated buildings, sad people with a yellow patch on their backs.”\textsuperscript{259} Emanuel Ringelblum saw differences, though only those that were quantitative: “The Ghetto is much more painful now than it was in the Middle Ages, because we that were so high and mighty have now fallen so low.”\textsuperscript{260} The Germans avoided such historical comparisons. Henryk Bryskier wrote: “By decree of the German authorities, the ghetto was disguised under the name “Jewish residential quarter.”\textsuperscript{261} Chaim Kaplan referred many times to this

\textsuperscript{258} Ibid., 188.
\textsuperscript{259} N. Szac-Wajnkranc, \textit{Przeminęło z ogniem. Pamiętnik} (Warszawa 1947); quote from second edition (Warszawa, ca. 1988), 12.
\textsuperscript{261} H. Bryskier, \textit{Żydzi pod swastyką, czyli getto w Warszawie w XX wieku} (Warszawa 2006), 7. The author wrote his diary in the years 1943-1944 while in hiding on the Aryan side of Warsaw.
onomastic manipulation. As he saw it, the Germans wanted to avoid negative associations:

In their radio programs the conquerors are very careful never to call the Jewish quarter
by its correct name – ghetto; it is not comfortable for one who wishes to create a ‘new
Europe’ to return to the customs of the Middle Ages.\footnote{Kaplan, \textit{Scroll of Agony}, 224.}

The Germans wanted to present the entire operation as part of the normal administrative division of the city into three districts.

But neither historical analogy nor bureaucratic euphemism fully reflects the phenomenon that was the Warsaw Ghetto. It not only exceeded the sum of all previous imagery, but it also eclipsed the well-worn ways of metaphorically grasping and understanding a closed space. The discourse on the ghetto has its own dynamic; it changes as the form of the ghetto itself evolves through its various stages. It departs from the formulaic ways of depiction, away from the object most deeply embedded in tradition. The archetype and synthesis of any closed space is the prison.\footnote{See M. Głowiński, “Labirynt, przestrzeń obcości,” in \textit{Mity przebrane. Dionizos. Narcyz. Prometeusz. Marcholt. Labirynt} (Kraków 1990), 175. In these multi-layered and highly inspirational reflections on the labyrinth and prison as spatial metaphors for enclosure, the author does not take into account the situation of the ghetto.} Let us then consider a way of using the metaphor of the prison with reference to the Warsaw Ghetto. But we should point out that this metaphor appeared, in its classical sense, even before the walls were raised and the ghetto was built. In the second month of the occupation, Waclaw Sieroszewski wrote: “We all feel that we are sealed off from the world by a thick, impenetrable wall. A huge prison, around which, somewhere out there, life goes on.”\footnote{W. Sieroszewski, op. cit., 144. Translator’s note: Waclaw Sieroszewski (1858-1945) was a Polish independence activist, ethnographer, novelist and politician.}

Walls raised in the middle of the city degraded its urbanistic structure; they tore through natural transportation routes, increased topographic absurdities, and caused growing problems in the everyday functioning of the urban organism. They reminded Poles of a labyrinth. Stanislaw Srokowski noted in April 1940: “With their various walls the Germans have circumscribed Warsaw’s Jewish neighborhood such that they have created in places a veritable labyrinth, from which it is difficult to escape.”\footnote{S. Srokowski, \textit{Zapiski - dziennik} 1 IX 1939 - 29 VIII 1944, Archiwum PAN, sygn. III, 22, p. 70.} It is characteristic that those writing down...
their thoughts on the other side of the wall did not entertain the image of a
labyrinth as Srokowski did. After all, for Jews the walls were above all the source
of the traumatic experience of being closed in, imprisoned. Two weeks before the
ghetto was closed, Ringelblum wrote: “The walls have been built higher than had
already been built on Rymarska Street. They give the impression of prison walls.
They want to wall us in alive – that is what the Jews are thinking.” And a few days
later he added: “The long wall at Wielopole Street looks like a prison wall.”

The walls thus created a gigantic prison in the middle of the city, an area
disconnected, separated, hermetically closed. The ghetto prisoners, like all
prisoners, rearrange their dreams for freedom into a yearning for open spaces,
without borders and walls that divide streets, for an open path ahead. One of
the paradoxes of this prison was its great size and yet its lack of space. The walls
encompassed a good chunk of the city; it was a relatively large space. But it
was still crowded and foul-smelling like a tight prison cell. Ludwig Hirszfeld
described his impressions after having moved into the ghetto: “The gate was shut
behind us. It was as if we had moved from a cold room into a crowded, stinking
prison […].” Another paradox was the existence in this prison-like space of
enclaves of relative freedom, or at least privacy, for example apartments, houses,
backyards. Green areas were an unusually rare enclave – indeed they were
practically non-existent in the ghetto – which is why every one of its meager
manifestations were taken as signs of refusal to take part in the prison-like order.
On 24 June 1942 Adam Czerniaków paid a visit to playgrounds being built in
spaces where rubble from buildings destroyed in the siege had been cleared
away. We can sense the above-mentioned paradox in his laconic diary entry: “I
visited the playgrounds being built on the corner of Franciszkańska and Nalewki
Streets and on Nowolipki Street, a playground in a prison.”

But the metaphor of a prison does not fully reflect the peculiar nature of the
ghetto. Indeed, there is no simple analogy, though Henryk Makower apparently
thought so:

> The realization that one could not wander from one street to another, that one could not
take a walk along the Vistula, or visit “Aryan” friends […] was difficult to bear. The only

266 E. Ringelblum, *Kronika getta warszawskiego: wrzesień 1939 - styczeń 1943*, intro. and
ed. A. Eisenbach, trans. from the Yiddish A. Rutkowski (Warszawa 1983), 185-186; for the last fragment quoted, see Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, 83.


268 Adama Czerniakowa dziennik getta warszawskiego 6 IX 1939 - 23 VII 1942, ed. M. Fuks
(Warszawa 1983), 291-292.
people who are able to comprehend this are those who are in prison or in some other closed camp.\textsuperscript{269}

Władysław Szpilman viewed it differently; he drew a distinction between a prison cell and the ghetto, and what emerges from his comments is a precise description of the torture associated with a closed life in that peculiar, incomparable space that was the Warsaw Ghetto.

I think it would have been psychologically easier to bear if we had been more obviously imprisoned – locked in a cell, for instance. That kind of imprisonment clearly, indubitably, defines a human being’s relationship to reality. There is no mistaking your situation: the cell is a world in itself, containing your own imprisonment, never interlocking with the distant world of freedom. […] The reality of the ghetto was all the worse just because it had the appearance of freedom. You could walk out into the street and maintain the illusion of being in a perfectly normal city. […] However, the streets of the ghetto – and those streets alone – ended in walls. I very often went out walking at random, following my nose, and unexpectedly came up against one of those walls. They barred my way when I wanted to walk on and there was no logical reason to stop me.\textsuperscript{270}

Thus, city space decreed to be a closed ghetto coexisted with space decreed to be open, though occupied. And herein lay the essence of torture. The possibility of maintaining eye contact with the “other side,” its palpable closeness, created the impression of an irresistible spatial continuum. But it was just a pernicious illusion. One’s presence in the ghetto was greater torture than being locked up in a normal prison, because the ghetto was a constant “allusion to freedom lost,” a constant expression of the radical nature and irreversibility of being closed in, and a reminder – simultaneously – of its unreality. A wall laced with shards of glass could not completely blind itself to the “other side” as can cell walls surrounding a prisoner. Unable in a literal sense to isolate and separate the two worlds from one another, the ghetto wall intensified its symbolic functions to an exceptional degree. It was a kind of sign demarcating space subjected to the criminal dictates of clerks. The power of their decisions became the boundary between life and death, freedom and captivity, hope and desperation, hell and normality.

Those who managed to get to the Aryan side usually formulated their impressions in radically different categories. As if they had been able to bridge the gulf between various forms of existence, or various states of existence. In


\textsuperscript{270} Szpilman, \textit{The Pianist}, 62-63.
this case, the shift to the other side not only has a colloquial meaning; it also
takes on a deeper metaphysical meaning. There are many descriptions of such
experiences. Let us point to three fundamental attributes of the experience of
shifting to the Aryan side.

First – a spatial paradox. The world behind the walls was close by, within arm’s
reach. But the physical proximity of two worlds stood in stark contrast to the
gulf that separated them. It was forbidden, under the threat of death, to cover the
distance of a couple steps between the two sides of a street divided by a wall. How
one normally experienced space thus had to be re-evaluated. Some witnesses
conceived the passage across the border of the closed quarter in absolute cate-
gories: the passage from one world to another world, from death to life. Władka
Mheed left the ghetto in December 1942.

One Sunday I was strolling along a Warsaw street in the ‘Aryan sector,’ not too far from
the ghetto wall. There was a playground on Krasinski Square opposite the wall, and
that Sunday it was crowded with youngsters and adults engaged in sports, dancing and
games. The small cafes were bursting with young men eating, drinking and having a
good time. I paused at some distance and took in the scene, then turned left and caught
sight of the ghetto wall only a stone’s throw away. Two different worlds on the same
street.271

Having gone over to the Aryan side, Noemi Szac-Wajnkranc saw “people calm
and quiet, trams and cars, stores, commerce, life. We are divided only by the wall,
just a few dozen steps, here is life, there is death.”272 Hirszfeld stated simply: “The
streets beyond the walls seemed to belong to another world.”273

Second – shocking normality. The category of “normality” appears very often
in descriptions of the passage to the other side. Authors reported a striking
change: from monstrosity to ordinariness, from terror to calm. They had left
behind a horrifying world, one that had gone awry, and crossed into a reality
that regained is true proportions. In these testimonies, the moment of crossing
resembles waking up from a nightmare. Still half-awake from a bad dream, one
is greeted by common household items, a window from which one can see a
normal world. Having crossed from the ghetto (after the Grossaktion Warsaw
of the summer of 1942) over to the Aryan side, Leokadia Schmidt could not
believe her own eyes: “normal street activity, trams, open stores. After the hell of

271 Feigele Peltel Miedzyrzecki [Mheed], On Both Sides of the Wall: Memoirs from the
Warsaw Ghetto (Holocaust Library, Jan. 1, 1979), 87.
272 N. Szac-Wajnkranc, op. cit., 48.
the ghetto, where all movement and life has died out, you have the impression of something unreal.”

Ruth Cyprys escaped the ghetto through the Law Court building on Leszno:

For the first time in many long months I had left our street to venture onto the Gentile side. [...] I felt happy to be in a normal street and to see the town. [...] shops, people, cars, cabs, trams, everything seemed so strange, so unusual. [...] Like a child, I enjoyed my freedom, going from shop to shop, buying unnecessary things for the sheer pleasure of buying, and behaving like a normal human being. Aimlessly I got on trams, alighting at the following stop. But what a pleasure this was! I scanned the faces of passers-by. I wanted to read people's eyes to find out whether they thought me a normal person; I was constantly sure that my face bore a stigma.

The normality of the Aryan streets stunned Helena Merenholc.

I walked through the streets and it was normal. Such was my first impression: normality. Bewilderment. It seemed to me that I was a free person. When, from the ghetto, I looked through the window at people on the Aryan side, it seemed to me that they were happy. The feelings of prisoners. [...] After all, I knew full well what kind of tragedy was playing out in Warsaw, in all of enslaved Poland. But the shadow of the ghetto followed me – hunger, typhus; the shadow of the irreversible Extermination.

Third – the incomprehensible contrast. The experience of fracture was often formulated in sacral language, using biblical metaphors. In Franciszka Grünberg’s account, the ghetto gate took on the character of the gates of hell, at which the guard played the role of the angel of death. Everything underwent radical change. The crowds of poor people, the clamor and dirt of the ghetto turned into the emptiness of clean Aryan streets. This contrast was unbearable. The brightness was blinding.

The gendarme calmly opened the gate. I felt as if the angel of death were releasing me from the depths of hell. One moment later, instead of throngs of miserable poor beggars with swollen yellow faces, instead of the desperate clamor, the terrified mob, instead of dirty streets full of trash, I saw clean, empty streets with an occasional figure passing by. I felt hypnotized: completely disoriented by the new sights, and by a new kind of fear; everything seemed strange and unfamiliar. I was in a thick fog and couldn't see a thing ahead of me. I was like someone who's been sitting in the dark for a long time and

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274 L. Schmidt, Cudem przeżyliśmy czas zagłady (Kraków 1983), 153.
276 Quote from B. Engelking, Na łące popiołów. Ocaleni z Holocaustu (Warszawa 1993), 205.
who then goes outside to discover that he can’t see: The sunlight makes him squint; the blinding brightness hurts. I felt blinded as well.277

The prison as a spatial metaphor for the ghetto turns out to be too pale, a bit too indistinct, to describe reality behind the ghetto wall. What seems necessary is either an additional, reinforcing attribute – as reflected in this entry by Abraham Lewin dated 18 May 1942 (“We are rotting in a prison, the like of which has never been seen before, for the ghetto the Germans have set up for us has no model or precursor in human history.”278) – or perhaps another choice of words, for example the metaphor of a cage (Noemi Szac-Wajnkranz, on her impressions during the ghetto’s early phase: “We are locked in a cage.”279). We read in Leokadia Schmidt’s diary about a lockdown in the workshop (szop) during the Grossaktion Warsaw: “The trap slammed shut. Everyone is in the cage. There is no way out.”280 But Abraham Lewin wrote, after the mass deportation was done: “The walls around the ghetto, that is, around the few streets still occupied by us, are nearing completion. The new ghetto – even more than the old – is like a small cage.”281

One associates a cage with a significantly more cramped space than a prison, but above all it is an inhuman enclosure. Animals are kept there, or some kind of mutated freaks who do not deserve to be called humans – that is “subhumans,” to use the language of the clerk overseeing the decreed space of occupied Warsaw.

Yet another phrase is “closed city,” an expression used many times by Rachel Auerbach, which functioned in her diary as a synonym for the ghetto. The closed city invokes a different conceptual tradition than does a prison, for example a city under siege, or one that is overcome with the plague, or one that is seized by death.282 “[…] I was about to write about death. About death walking in broad daylight through the streets of a closed city.”283 The phrase closed city, as conceived in a broad anthropological context, reshapes the ghetto into a gigantic scene in which the final spectacle plays itself out. That drama of fate, of the mystery of life

278 Abraham Lewin, A Cup of Tears: A Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto (Fontana, 1988), 77.
280 L. Schmidt, op. cit., 59.
281 Abraham Lewin, A Cup of Tears, 192.
282 For more on the comparison between the ghetto and a city affected by the plague, see B. Engelking “Czas przestał dla mnie istnieć…”. Analiza doświadczenia czasu sytuacji ostatecznej (Warszawa 1996), 160-177, and J. Leociak, Tekst wobec Zagłady, 217-226.
and death, is expressed in the language of modernity, in the categories of mass culture, in the registry – so to speak – of reduced means of expression. Thus, not an ancient tragedy, but some kind of street tragifarce – a “corpse fair,” “spontaneous theater,” or a “self-winding sound film.” On 6 March 1942, Rachel Auerbach wrote:

Life, especially the kind of life as ripe for death as ours in this closed city, sometimes offers up bizarrely vivid symbolic abstracts, like melodramatic ideas for a banal film.

The ghetto before and after the Grossaktion Warsaw, deserted and broken up into isolated enclaves of workshops, consisted of two completely different scenes. From the many visions of the vestigial ghetto, let us choose two examples. Abraham Lewin was aware that death, walking in the streets of the closed city, had transformed those streets into a “dead city.” We find precisely such wording in his entry under the date 16 October 1942:

The Jewish streets of Warsaw are deserted, their residents have disappeared. I get the chills as I make my way to work in the morning, and particularly in the evening, when I cross the deserted streets. A “dead city” – in the full sense of the word.

Rachel Auerbach highlighted the horrible condition of a city in which there is no longer a single living soul; humans being gone, things were now dying in the streets and courtyards.

Oh, the “still lifes” of the Ghetto plunged into agony! […] It is enough – in order to understand what has happened – to look at the trash piles created in the Jewish yards.

The ghetto was thus transformed into a refuse dump, a disorderly pile of junk, the image of chaos, degradation and debasement. But it would seem that, in Rachel Auerbach’s description, the trash dump is something more – some kind of extreme form of degraded and tormented existence. The dead city – stripped, defiled, desecrated – died once again in the most hideous scenery of biological decay.

Things solidly made and from even more solid materials defend themselves a bit more fiercely against decay. However, they follow the same determined path. Dumped on a
pile, like a corpse in the summer, swelling terribly day by day, smudged everywhere with shit, brewed and rotting at once from the heat and humidity, fetid, and befouled, they are waiting only for the fire, which would put an end to the monstrosity of their decomposition.  

The metaphor of the prison thus changes, metonymically, into a rubbish heap. Based on a similar principle, *pars pro toto*, one can view the Jewish cemetery along Warsaw’s Okopowa Street as a metonym for the ghetto, because the cemetery is a form of exclusion. Jean Baudrillard wrote about how the dead are cast out into the cemetery-ghetto:

There is an irreversible evolution from savage societies to our own: little by little, the dead cease to exist. […] They are no longer beings with a full role to play, worthy partners in exchange, and we make this obvious by exiling them further and further away from the group of the living. In the domestic intimacy of the cemetery, the first grouping remains in the heart of the village or town, becoming the first ghetto, prefiguring every future ghetto […] .

Zygmunt Bauman took up Baudrillard’s thought, writing: “Cemeteries, Baudrillard suggests, were the first ghettos; the archetypal ghettos, the pattern for all ghettos to come. However they differ in ritual, all funerals are acts of exclusion.”

All of the tropes discussed so far have been spatial in nature. But we have another metaphorical arrangement available to us that serves to describe the ghetto, the sources for which we can find in the tradition of the metaphor of sickness and disease. Not to take this theme too far, let us point to the most expressive example. The wooden footbridge over Chłodna Street at Żelazna Street, one of the ghetto’s most characteristic spatial stigmas, was what Henryk Makower called an “urbanistic wound on the countenance of Warsaw.” In one of Wojdysławski’s diary entries, the entire ghetto was a wound. A description of a person dying of hunger on the street becomes a description of the city and the world:

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289 Ibid., 7.
290 For more on the Jewish cemetery in the ghetto, see the below section, in part II of this book, entitled “Contemporary Antigone.”
293 H. Makower, op. cit., 176.
Fatal hunger. And the legs get thicker. They are not legs, but rather massive chunks of meat torn up by the swelling of the hunger. [...] And all this enormous space of meat is one suppurative, swollen wound. [...] The eyes of a man not used to such a sight turn away. But that cannot be done. The head remains still, the muscles are tight, the eyelids are too short to cover the eye. The wound remains. The whole street is a wound. The ghetto is a stinking, festering wound. The sun is a wound.\textsuperscript{294}

We have presented here a review of the chain of metaphors that could capture the phenomenon that was the ghetto. But the ghetto itself was a metaphorical formula: for the topography of the absurd, of strangeness and enslavement; for divided, lacerated, wounded space; for a stigmatized, degraded, imprisoned and tormented existence.

Taking an Aryan Tram through the Warsaw Ghetto

As of 1 January 1939, eight tram lines ran through that part of Warsaw that would soon make up the territory of the ghetto. The greatest number of these trams traveled along Chłodna Street: the “11,” “16,” “21,” and “15,” which also ran along Bonifraterska, along which the “17” also ran. The “9” ran along Tłomackie and Leszno Streets. Tram cars identified by letters served the so-called circular lines. For example the “O” tram covered Gęsia – Dworzec Główny (the main railway station) – Miodowa – Franciszkańska – Gęsia; and the “T” tram ended its route at Plac Teatralny by way of Towarowa, Twarda, and Trębacka.

The war broke up this thick net of tram connections. Severed overhead lines, tracks pulled up from their foundations, tracks strewn with rubble, destroyed tram cars, burned out power stations. The damage was huge, and yet the first tram moved out of Wilson Square station, headed for Krasiński Square, on 18 October 1939. At the end of October, trams along the next line began to move: from Młynarska Street in the Wola district to Żelazna Brama Square. Partly rebuilt tracks guided trams to the same places as before the war, and the renovated tram cars were the same ones that had run in the prewar era, but nothing was the same as it had been, because the Warsaw trams had returned to life in an occupied city. They traversed the area that the occupier had taken and now ruled. Signs of conquest and captivity were not just the painful evidence of material damage and the increasing repression. Decrees issued by the occupation authorities had broken the previous urban order, they had imposed on the
city a new spatial system – foreign and oppressive, based on segregation, division and isolation.

In the autumn of 1939, the two first tram lines still ran freely through the area that would soon be closed, that would soon be separated from the rest and encircled by a wall. For now these trams were unobstructed, but they were already partially isolated and specially marked. They passed barbed wire fences and signs reading “Area under Typhus Threat.” They entered Chłodna Street (which was the topographical axis of the future ghetto, and which – as of June 1940 – would be called Eisgrubenstrasse), passed Plac Mirowski (which would soon be called An der Markthalle), continued along Graniczna Street (Grentzstrasse), and ended at Żelazna Brama Square (Torplatz). In March 1940, line number 16 began to run along Leszno (as of August of that year Gerichtsstrasse), as later would line 22. In April a new line started, number 1, which ran through Dzika and Zamenhofa (soon to be combined as Wildstrasse), Gęsia (Gänsestrasse), Franciszkańska, and Bonifraterska (Klosterstrasse) Streets. As of September, line 28 ran along Żelazna (that is, Eisenstrasse), Nowolipki, Smocza, Gęsia and Nalewki Streets.

The path and names of streets through which these trams ran changed, as did the street scenery. From the beginning of the occupation, certain spaces were reserved “Nur für Deutsche,” and after a certain time it was firmly established that these spaces were the front of platforms, and the front of tram cars. At the end of September 1940, a tram entered the streets of Warsaw that was to be used only by Jews. It was painted yellow and marked on all sides with a Star of David. Placards read “Nur für Juden.” Ringelblum pointed out that “the ‘pure Jewish’ streetcar – i.e. a single streetcar for Jews – has a yellow placard; when there are two cars in a train, one of the cars is for Jews, the other for Christians (the Jewish one in the rear), and the placard is half-yellow.”

That tram continued to run in undivided space. What was divided was the tram itself, with one wagon designated as Christian, and one as Jewish. On 26 November 1940 (that is, just after the ghetto was closed), three tram lines were activated that were designated for Jews only; they ran within the range of the closed space. Signs bearing the numbers 15, 28 and 29 were painted yellow. In February 1941, the three special Jewish lines were shut down, replaced by a tram marked by a blue-white Star of David. At the beginning, it ran from Muranów Square through Muranowska, Zamenhofa, Dzielnia, Karmelicka, Leszno, and Żelazna Streets, to the crossing with Chłodna Street. On December 1941, after the ghetto’s borders were changed, the path of the Jewish tram changed; it started at the Leszno-Żelazna intersection, and ran

295  Ringelblum, Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto, 65.
along Żelazna, Nowolipki, Smocza, Gęsia, Zamenhofa, Muranowska Streets, Muranów Square, and Nalewki Street, and then again on Gęsia and Zamenhofa, Dzielnna, Karmelicka Streets, and then back along Leszno to Żelazna Street.

This was a new tram line, built exclusively for the ghetto’s needs. But the tram car itself, though changed since the occupation, remained a traditional Warsaw tram. At the same time, peculiar horse-drawn ghetto trams appeared on the streets of the closed quarter, which belonged to the “Towarzystwo Komunikacji Omnibusowej” of Kohn and Heller, which had received a license from the Germans. As Henryk Bryskier wrote, they were a strange hybrid of a traditional omnibus, mobile circus shed, and gypsy wagon. They were set up:

[...] on a high, heavy platform, a main body with windows and painted yellow and blue, stairs up the back with handrails, and benches inside both left and right. The conductor with a light violet armband and Maciejówka cap on his head with a violet bandsold tickets, and instead of a motorman, a coachman, urging the horses forward with a whip.\(^\text{296}\)

These trams debuted in July 1941 and, at the beginning, served the Small Ghetto. As of February 1942 they were at work on two lines – one in the Large Ghetto and one in the Small Ghetto – which were completely separated by Chłodna Street, which was now Aryan and could not be crossed.

The rise of the closed ghetto in the middle of the urban organism posed a major challenge for the prewar company “Tramwaje i Autobusy,” which was transformed in July 1941 into the Miejskie Zakłady Komunikacyjne (Städtische Verkehrsbetriebe Warschau) and was headed up by the German Hipolit Alertz. The fact that such a large tract of land in the northern part of Warsaw had been cut off from the rest of the city was unacceptable. It would block the east-west thoroughfare (Leszno and Chłodna Streets) and the south-north thoroughfare – that is, the shortest path leading from the Warsaw Center to the northern district of Żoliborz. Thus, compromise solutions were implemented – which were practical in transportation terms, but which represented a breach of the principle of complete isolation – involving the policy of “transit” through the ghetto, by which the idea of the ghetto as a closed area, one which was disconnected, separated and – so to speak – impenetrable, would be violated.

On 23 October 1940, the Jewish wagons attached to line number 1 trams were eliminated. From that date on, line 1 trams, which ran from Powązki to Teatralny Square via Dzika and Muranowska Streets, Muranów Square, Nalewki and Bielańska Streets, could thus carry only Aryan travelers. Which means that,

\(^\text{296}\) H. Bryskier, op. cit., 80.
Taking an Aryan Tram through the Warsaw Ghetto

three weeks before the ghetto was closed, a tram appeared that played a “transit” role, though it was only a half-measure because, though Jews could not get on the number 1 tram, it was for Aryan passengers still a normal line, and line 1 trams stopped at every tram stop. This situation changed after 16 November, when Aryan trams, during their transit through the now closed ghetto, were escorted by the Blue Police; they travelled at maximum speed and did not stop at the ghetto tram stops. At first, the transit routes were Chłodna, Gęsia, Muranowska, Nalewki, Franciszkańska, Bonifraterska and Leszno Streets. As the area of the closed quarter was reduced, as ghetto gates were eliminated, and as the battle against smuggling heated up, the number of transit streets went down. As of the middle of March 1941, trams on lines 16, 22, and 23B no longer went through Leszno, but rather through Chlodna Street. A month later transit through Muranów Square, Franciszkańska, Nalewki, and Sierakowska Streets was closed, and the shortened line 4 route led only through Bonifraterska Street.

The practical benefit of this abnormal situation, marked by transit through the extraterritorial area of the city, was smuggling. Bags of food, bread, and packages were thrown from trams moving along the ghetto streets without stopping, things which immediately disappeared behind the gates of neighboring buildings. Mojżesz Passenstein, author of a monograph on smuggling written on the Aryan side in 1943, wrote:

Tram cars moved through the ghetto along Chłodna (from Wrona to Mirowska), Zamenhofa (from the opening of Dzika), Gęsia, Muranowska, Nalewki, Franciszkańska, Bonifraterska (there was even a terminal tram stop there), and Leszno Streets. These were used by smugglers very effectively. Polish smugglers, usually young, would stand near the tram’s steps, and as the tram wagon was moving through the ghetto, would quickly toss out bags of food, mostly potatoes, onto the cobblestones. Their Jewish partners waiting on the sidewalks would grab the bags and run toward the gates.297

The archive of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw contains an account written in 1963 by Tadeusz Buze, who worked during the occupation as a conductor in trams running in transit through the ghetto. He described the entire smuggling procedure in detail: cramming the bags under the benches, throwing them through the window or from the tram steps, paying off the Blue Police. He also talked about mishaps. One of the conductors, “during such work, was taken from the tram in the ghetto and sent to Auschwitz, where he died.”298

297 “Szmugiel w getcie warszawskim,” Biuletyn ŻIH 26 (1958), 54.
298 AŻIH 301/6001. In Bogdan Wojdowski’s novel Bread for the Departed, we read about the trolley car driver who “always had a loaf of bread in plain view behind the wind-shield […] and when he drove through the Ghetto he would slow down, ring his bell
Jerzy Fudakowski, an engineer by profession, described an interesting aspect of this history. During the occupation, he worked for the Miejskie Zakłady Komunikacyjne. In order to solve the smuggling problem, the German supervisors of the MZK introduced what they called “pilots” – that is, ticket inspectors from the MZK Traffic Department who were supposed to keep an eye on activities in tram wagons as they rolled through the ghetto, and to requisition all smuggled goods and hand them over to German authorities. But the “pilots” most often simply took the smuggled goods for themselves, which was a serious crime in the eyes of the occupiers. One man – a certain Bolesław Macioszczyk, director of the Division of Personnel and Supervision in the Traffic Department, and one of Hipolit Alertz’s trusted associates – distinguished himself with his level of private requisition. He had supposedly hung a portrait of Hitler on his apartment wall, but neither the Führer on the wall nor his German connections could save him from being sent to Auschwitz when, in the spring of 1941, the Germans discovered that he had been hoarding in his apartment goods “requisitioned” from trams traveling in transit through the ghetto.

The policy of transit thus opened up new opportunities for smuggling, which was strictly banned and harshly punished. But it seems that no one was able to oppose another one of the transit policy’s benefits, namely that it provided an opportunity for a particular cognitive experience, a one-of-a-kind spatial experience: travel through the ghetto on an Aryan tram. Such passage, though formally legal, was in fact a violation of the principles on which the Jewish residential quarter was based. And yet the borders of the ghetto, the crossing of which could mean the death penalty, stood wide open for a common Warsaw tram.

The uniqueness of transit through the ghetto was not based on the fact that a tram with passengers moved through forbidden terrain without proper authorization. Such would be a trivial situation, not worthy of our interest. The transit area had not only a different administrative-legal status but above all a different – so to speak – ontological status. This was truly a different world, in which walls, barbed wire and guarded gates took on the character of a border between life and death. It was a closed space, separated and disconnected from the spatial continuum designed, first of all, to effectuate its degradation, and second, to cut

for the beggars, and throw the bread into the street for them.” One day “they pulled him out of the trolley and shot him.” See Bogdan Wojdowski, Bread for the Departed, trans. Madeline G. Levine (Northwestern University Press, 1997), viii.

299 Work entitled Dzieje Miejskich Zakładów Komunikacyjnych podczas wojny i okupacji w latach 1939-1945, Archiwum Państwowe m. st. Warszawy, Zbior Rękopisów, sygn. 76.
it off from normal existence, to cause it to be eclipsed, covered over. To wall it off (in the deepest sense of these words) from the rest. One of the most perceptive diarists of the Warsaw Ghetto, Chaim Kaplan, wrote about the two kinds of wall enclosing the ghetto: “We are imprisoned within double walls: a wall of brick for our bodies, and a wall of silence for our spirits.”  

One needed to turn one’s eyes away from the ghetto, to not look (just as we today sometimes do not look at drastic photos from those times), to distance oneself from it, to make it into something foreign, existing somewhere beyond the sphere of our moral responsibility. The sealed-off ghetto was thus a prologue to the Holocaust not just in the sense of indirect extermination, through hunger, illness and repression. It was one element in a strategy for the mental extermination of the world behind the walls, of that which was vanishing from the consciousness of people on the other side.

So, a tram entered that other world. One could not get off, but one could look. No one had expressly forbidden that. Aryan passengers could thus look at the ghetto, though it was forbidden for Jews to look out the windows of their homes around Pawiak prison; those windows had to be covered with dark paper and plywood. Ringelblum noted: “For every crack, for every little hole” in those windows, “there was the threat of a death sentence.” In the tram, a policeman or a “pilot” was there to make sure food was not smuggled. But the smuggling of images picked up by the retina was allowed.

What then could they see, those who wanted to look through the window, those who decided to look? First, the “Area under Typhus Threat” – ever more crowded, more ashen and gray, more distinct and separated from the rest of the city. The ghetto, collapsing further into itself, further and more foreign, even as it was moving past just outside the window. It was precisely this paradox of proximity and distance, the sense of the strangeness of a well-known city, that imposed itself as the first impression in testimonies describing travel on an Aryan tram through the Warsaw Ghetto. Testimonies written at the time, during the occupation. Let us present them in chronological order.

The earliest account known to me about passage by Aryan tram through the ghetto comes from the diary of Stanisław Rembek. He was a writer known before the war for two novels about the war with the Bolsheviks in 1920: W polu and Nagan. Throughout the war he lived in Grodzisk Mazowiecki, a town just outside of Warsaw, where he traveled to take care of various matters. In the entry dated...
25 November, Monday – 27 November, Wednesday, Warsaw [1940], Rembek noted that he traveled by tram number 27 to Żoliborz:

I had to pass through the ghetto twice on the day before it was closed. There were such crowds on the sidewalks and in the streets, as if an incessant demonstration were taking place. Crossing the street all the Jews were baring their heads. Twice the tram was searched by the gendarmes in search of food items. Apparently a couple of Christian hawkers had been shot. Bread and butter were placed on one of them in order to deter the others. Those who refused to carry out humiliating tasks were killed. Because the Germans ordered the hawkers to kiss Jews on their bare buttocks. One woman was ordered to kiss a Jew whose buttocks had been smeared with cream.\textsuperscript{302}

The writer did not know that he was passing through a ghetto that had already been closed. As of 16 November 1940, twenty-two gates were guarded by German gendarmes, Polish Blue Police, and Jewish police. But Poles were able to freely cross the ghetto border until 26 November. It was probably on this very day that Rembek was traveling by tram. The entry under the dates 25–27 November continues, but its content involves events of the next day, 27 November:

Today I set off for Inflancka Street via the Kierbedź Bridge. The tram drove through the ghetto without being searched, it even stopped at the stops. To be sure, Polish police stood at the front of the platform, obviously to make sure that no one would get on or get off. There is a great deal of traffic in the ghetto. I submitted my application with no great difficulty. Then I walked along Freta Street to Lilka’s, and from there I went to 3 Maja Avenue, where I caught the tram number 24.\textsuperscript{303}

Stanisław Srokowski, a professor of geography at the University of Warsaw, lived in Bukowiec at Legionowo. He thus traveled to Warsaw from the north, to Warszawa Gdańska train station, and from there to the city center by tram. On 29 November 1940 Srokowski traveled through the ghetto. Not quite two weeks after its gates had been closed:

I was in Warsaw today (29.XI). One can reach the city from the Gdańska train station by tram (lines 17, 14, or 4) or by going around on Konwiktorska, Zakroczymska, Freta and Długa Streets. The gates to the apartment houses on the ghetto border are walled up and plastered. Probably, over time, the windows will be walled up, too. Jewish guards with armbands stand everywhere along the border of the Ghetto, not allowing people to enter. In addition, German soldiers in helmets with rifles. The ghetto is a peculiar sight, with its whirling crowd of Jews. I took line 4 through Nalewki and Muranów. Prices are supposed to be high there. Apparently bread goes for as much as 10 zł. per kilo, butter for 50 zł., bacon for 30 zł., etc. The Germans have broken up many so-called mixed

\textsuperscript{302} S. Rembek, \textit{Dziennik okupacyjny} (Warszawa 2000), 133.
\textsuperscript{303} Ibid., 134
marriages. The wife in the ghetto, the husband on the Aryan side, or the reverse. The
children stay on the Aryan side. Soon the Jews will have their telephones cut off. Even
today there is no way to get into the Jewish quarter because they are not issuing passes. 304

The next trip through the ghetto – chronologically, in terms of when it was
written – came on 8 January 1941. The passenger this time was Zofia Nałkowska.
She had gone to this area before to pick up goods for her store from the Państwowy
Monopol Tytoniowy (the State Tobacco Monopoly) on Pawia Street. In January
1941 the ghetto was already closed and inaccessible, but one could still get a
look at it:

The tram crosses through the exotic Jewish quarter with its dreadful streets, overcrowded
despite the cold, its boarded-up shops, its burnt-out buildings. In fact only Jews and all
Jews live there now, guards stand at the entrances and exits, and throughout the entire
trip the tram does not stop even once. It is extremely strange – as an image, as an idea. 305

The following entry in Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz’s diary is dated 23 February 1941:

For the first time I take a tram through the ghetto. It stops on this side of the wall, then
goes the entire length of Leszno, and stops only on the other side of that wall there.
We stand with the conductor at the front platform of the tram and, with a heavy heart,
I observe. What strikes me above all are the congestion on the streets and the crowded
people in black. That crowd looks exotic, incomparable even to what we used to see on
Nalewki. Many stores, a lot of trade traffic. I notice that beggars are lying on the streets,
on the sidewalks, with terribly white faces. Some are covered by newspapers: corpses.
I see a rickshaw-hearse driver. He is pushing a large black box, I do not know if it is with
a corpse, or if it is empty. There are a couple beautiful cafés on Leszno. The tram oper-
ator has a couple of packages, slowing down at the turns, he throws them out, looking
only for people he knows. The package are carried away by practiced and greedy hands,
they disappear into the black crowd. I shiver at the thought that my friends live here, the
parents of friends. Now and then I get news from them, but they are written as if from
the beyond. 306

Stanisław Rembek went through the ghetto once again on 6 March 1941:

In the ghetto I saw a great crush of people. There is apparently more food there than
in the Aryan part, and the gendarmes and policemen are said to take in thousands in
bribes every day. 307

304 S. Srokowski, op. cit., 121.
306 J. Iwaszkiewicz, op. cit., 175.
Zygmunt Klukowski, a doctor from Zamojszczyzna, traveled to occupied Warsaw for vacation. He was a careful observer of the city, and he wrote down his observations in his diary. As a passenger on an Aryan tram in the ghetto, Klukowski found himself in a situation marked by a two-fold distance, because his presence in Warsaw itself was as a person from the outside; one might say, it was a crossing. On 3 September 1941, he wrote:

I went through the ghetto by tram several times. It is something so strange that it is truly difficult to understand how something like this could have been thought up and done. Barriers with Polish and German policemen, high walls, sometimes a wooden bridge thrown up from one sidewalk to another. All of this closes off the entire quarter as if it were plague-stricken, separating the Jewish population from the Aryan. The tumult and clamor is frightening. What strikes the eye is the exceptionally small number of Jews in traditional garb. Movement everywhere is highly animated, stores are full of goods, at least it seems that way looking from a tram moving through the entire Jewish quarter without stopping. Apparently the death rate here is huge, of course among the poorest, who live in the most terrible conditions.  

Maria Dąbrowska traveled through the ghetto on Sunday, 2 November 1941:

Warsaw woke up today under drifts of snow and 3°C frost. In the morning, tidying up and darning. At 2 pm we left for Żoliborz to visit the Moszyński’s for dinner. Dinner was good, with hors d’oeuvres and vodka. We returned at 5 pm. We went through the ghetto, where there is no longer gas or electricity. Jadzia came over in the evening.  

Barykada Wolności (Barricade of Liberty) was an underground publication of the leftist organization Polish Socialists. In its no. 75 dated 30 November 1941, we find an article entitled “Solidarność ofiar – to także braterstwo broni” (Solidarity of the victims – that, too, is brotherhood in arms) with the following passage:

Several dozen thousand onlookers travel every day through the closed Warsaw Ghetto. They look at the crowded streets, at idle groups of emaciated and bedraggled children drifting around, sometimes at corpses lying on the sidewalk. How little do they reflect on what is going on in this collective prison? A tenth of the residents have died there over the course of a year. And of that number, a significant part - from hunger.

The next two entries in Rembek’s diary involve the year 1942. Under the date 11 April, the diarist recalls his stay in Warsaw three days before. He emphasized that frost was giving way to warm weather, the earth was thawing. Spring was on the way. His wife was waiting for him at a friend’s house. “I went from Saska Kępa [a...

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309 M. Dąbrowska, op. cit., 366.
Warsaw neighborhood on the right bank of the Vistula river] and then through the ghetto. What struck me was the emptiness there.” This last comment, which is rather strange in light of other observations – emptiness in the ghetto (?) – can perhaps be explained by the fact that the date 8 April was the final day of Passover, which lasted seven days (eight in the diaspora) beginning with the Seder meal, which in 1942 fell on Wednesday, 1 April. The writer got a view of the ghetto in the spring of that year, ten days before the deadly night when the Gestapo murdered, according to a prepared list, 52 people pulled from their homes and into the streets. This was the first organized act of terror, methodically carried out, and it was a development that many took as a sign of the coming catastrophe. We should recall that Operation Reinhard, designed to exterminate the Jews in the Generalgouvernement, was already underway, and that concentration camps at Belżec and Sobibór were up and running in March and April 1942, respectively. The next time that Rembek saw the ghetto was after the Grossaktion Warsaw had begun, but he did not make it inside. In his entry dated 31 July we read, among other things:

[…] since somewhere around the 20th of this month, the Germans have begun liquidating the Warsaw Ghetto. […] Riding alongside the ghetto, I saw a unit of Ukrainians under the command of a Gestapo officer, guards posted along the wall, and I heard shots. Apparently they are transporting around 600 Jews daily from the Gdańska train station in sealed train cars. But no one knows where they are going.\textsuperscript{311}

The chronologically final trace of a transit passage through the ghetto is the entry in Zofia Nałkowska’s diary dated 31 August 1942. The Grossaktion Warsaw had been underway for forty-one days. Close to 210,000 Jews had already been transported to Treblinka.\textsuperscript{312} Franciszek Wyszyński, who was careful to record the weather in his diary every day, wrote under the date 31 August: “in the morning cloudy; in the afternoon rain, in the evening cool, a wintery night.”\textsuperscript{313} On this day, Nałkowska visited her mother’s grave at Powązki Cemetery. She returned from the cemetery by tram. “Passage through a deserted city, a city of terror and torment. Every window and balcony, which used to be full of people, today empty.”\textsuperscript{314}

\textsuperscript{311} S. Rembek, op. cit., 301.
\textsuperscript{313} F. Wyszyński, op. cit., 202.
\textsuperscript{314} Z. Nałkowska, op. cit., 411.
It is difficult to recreate a concrete topography based on Nałkowska, Klukowski, and Dąbrowska’s diary entries. We can only state that when Nałkowska traveled through the ghetto in January 1941, she did so before the tram routes were changed and the movement of Aryan trams within the ghetto walls was restricted. She could thus take a longer route than Klukowski, who traveled through the ghetto in September 1941 (that is, after the above changes had been made), but who made the trip “several times.” The route she took on 31 August 1942 is even more problematic. If she really did travel through the ghetto during the Grossaktion Warsaw, then she might have taken the number 1 tram, which ran from the Military Cemetery at Powązki to Teatralny Square by way of Powązkowska, Dzika, Muranowska Streets, Muranów Square, Nalewki and Bielańska Streets. Nałkowska could thus have entered the ghetto near Umschlagplatz (at the corner of Dzika and Stawki Streets), turned onto Muranowska Street, continued to Muranów Square, then turn onto Bonifraterska Street. But was that still possible at the time? Probably it was also possible that she took a tram that ran along Okopowa Street and the ghetto wall. We know from Dąbrowska’s entry that in November 1941 she returned from Żoliborz to her apartment on Polna Street, which means she traversed the ghetto from north to south. Thus, she must have traveled along Bonifraterska Street because, since April 1941, the transit route number 4 had been shortened and afterwards ran only along Bonifraterska Street. But Srokowski, also on his way from Żoliborz to the city center, could still go through Muranów Square and along Nalewki Street (which he himself highlighted), since he took line 4 at the end of November 1940 – that is, in the first weeks after the ghetto was closed off. Beyond the names of streets and squares, we have no other topographical details that would allow us to locate this trip in concrete space. In November 1940, Rembek traveled to Inflancka Street, which means he must have gone by tram along Bonifraterska Street, which until December 1941 was inside the ghetto between Świętojerska and Sapieżyńska Streets. Later the area east of Bonifraterska Street was separated from the ghetto and this part of it became a border street. We know that Iwaszkiewicz traveled along Leszno between Żelazna and Tłomacka Streets, but we do not know in what direction: from the Wola district toward Teatralny Square, or vice versa. On 19 March 1941, because the entrance gate at Tłomacka Street (which led to Bielańska Street) was closed, the routes taken by trams number 16, 11, and 22B were changed. Iwaszkiewicz, traveling three weeks earlier, must have taken one of them. After these routes were changed, the path to Teatralny Square via Bielańska Street was blocked; transit trams could no longer run along Leszno Street. Their course thus took them along Wolska Street; they entered the ghetto through the gate at Wronia Street, continued along Chłodna Street until Mirowska Street,
crossed the ghetto border, and continued to Teatralny Square via Żelaznej Bramy and Bankowy Squares and Senatorska Street. Iwaszkiewicz thus still had the opportunity to view the ghetto’s main street along its entire main stretch. As Jan Mawult wrote: “Leszno – it is Marszałkowska Street with its traffic, trade, and commotion.”

Srokowski’s attention is drawn to the external characteristics of the recently closed Jewish quarter, above all the resulting transportation difficulties; the walled up gates and windows of apartment houses; “Jewish guards with armbands” and “German soldiers in helmets with rifles” standing watch everywhere along the ghetto borders; and – in this walled-up world – the whirling crowd of Jews. Descriptions of scenery written from the perspective of an observant witness cross over into informational discourse. This diarist did not write just about what he had seen, but about what he knew or had heard about from circulating rumors. His comments on prices are characteristic; indeed, this motif runs throughout the entire diary, almost obsessively. Srokowski constantly reported on fluctuating prices and tried to comment on them, most often putting blame for high prices on the Jews. Rembek’s entry is also two-layered: observation becomes a canvas for adducing rumors and gossip. The observational level is, after all, rather thin – “crowds on the sidewalks,” “a great deal of traffic,” the “great crush” of people – as if the diarist was paying more attention to what people were saying about the ghetto than what was visible through the window. The key needed to open this perspective is the single word “apparently,” such that: the Germans had “apparently” treated some Christian hawkers on the ghetto streets brutally; a couple were shot, others humiliated; “apparently” there was more food in the ghetto than on the Aryan side; “apparently” the Germans were transporting Jews somewhere in sealed train cars.

The Aryan tram passenger entered the ghetto with a certain amount of knowledge gained previously, with a certain set of images of the world to be found there. One can only assume how the confrontation between these images and reality looked. A reality – we might add – that was perceived in parts, fragmentarily; that appeared in a peculiar (if we might risk the use of such a term) theatrical situation. It seems that one of the most conventionalized (even at that time) images of the ghetto was that of the crowd in the streets. It is a motif that dominates descriptions and accounts. Those “dreadful streets, overcrowded despite the cold” (Nałkowska), and that “whirling crowd of Jews” (Srokowski), seem to blind the viewer to anything else. People crowding on the sidewalks lend

the streets of the ghetto an exotic appearance, an adjective used by Nałkowska, who wrote about the “exotic Jewish quarter,” and by Iwaszkiewicz, for whom the “crowd” itself looked “exotic, incomparable even to what we used to see on Nalewki [Street].”

That which was exotic and strange was thus the most significant feature of the ghetto that displayed itself through the tram window. Nałkowska wrote: “It is extremely strange,” Srokowski called the ghetto a “peculiar sight,” and Klukowski began the commentary on his trip through the ghetto with the sentence: “It is something so strange that it is truly difficult to understand how something like this could have been thought up and done.” In Iwaszkiewicz’s account, the radical otherness of the ghetto reality takes on an eschatological quality: What we are looking at is not of this world.

But what did passengers on those trams really see? What was Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz able to see while moving along Leszno Street? He passed, for example, the Carmelite Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which was the focus of the ghetto’s Catholic community. He also passed the apartment house at Leszno 18, where Emanuel Ringelblum lived, and the building across the street at Leszno 13, the headquarters of the Office to Combat Usury and Profit-eering, also called Group 13, which was in fact collaborating with the Gestapo and was led by Abraham Gancwajch. He certainly could not see the fotoplastikon at work from April through July 1941 on the ground floor of the eighteenth-century Jacobson townhouse at Leszno 27. At the time, this venture was widely promoted. Rabbi Szymon Huberband reported that posters were put up every week promising a new program; boys walked the streets lifting boards attached to long sticks advertising the event; and a clown with a red nose and pink cheeks stood at the gate at Leszno 27 encouraging passers-by to come in. But maybe, from the window of his passing tram, Iwaszkiewicz managed to get a glimpse of that colorful clown amidst “the congestion on the streets and the crowded people in black.”

In addition to the crowd, Klukowski saw Polish and German policemen, walls, a wooden bridge thrown up over the street, “stores […] full of goods, at least it seems that way looking from a tram.” Nałkowska saw guards at the exits, boarded-up stores, burnt-out buildings. Iwaszkiewicz saw beggars, corpses covered with newspapers, a man pushing a hearse with a black box, but also “beautiful cafés.” Only Maria Dąbrowska’s entry lacks any element pointing to the topography or appearance of the ghetto. It includes a single sentence in which the diarist, beyond stating simply that she had ridden through the ghetto, mentioned that there was no gas or electricity in the closed quarter (which was inaccurate, since ghetto residents had gas and electricity, though only at defined
Taking an Aryan Tram through the Warsaw Ghetto

hours). Dąbrowska’s entry lacks the kind of observations that characterize the other diaries; the chance to get a glimpse, through a tram window, of that closed world – to which one normally did not have access and which one was, in principle, not allowed to see – did not call forth in this writer a need to take note of the imagery. She confined herself to what amounted to common knowledge.

Dąbrowska’s record is provocative. One might treat it as an expression of a certain indifference when – between mention of a visit to the Moszyński’s (dinner with “hors d’oeuvres and vodka”) and an evening visit by Jadzia – we read a laconic indication that she had travelled through the ghetto. Here there are no expressive statements, no adjectives like “frightening,” no emotions invoked like those we read in Iwaszkiewicz’s entry: “with a heavy heart” and “I shiver at the thought […].” Dąbrowska eschewed use of the convention of observation, the stylistics of expressing horror, furor, or shock. She eschewed description itself, confining herself to the statement: “We went through the ghetto.” But maybe that is enough. Maybe that is more powerful than any attempt at a description.

The passage cited from the article printed in Barykada Wolności has a special place. It was the end of November 1941. The second and most severe wave of the typhus epidemic had reached its zenith, the death rate was reaching its peak, and hunger was increasing at a frightening rate. In this article, the individual and private point of view disappears. The perspective widens. The camera’s narrative lens shows the tram passengers on front stage, while that which they are seeing is in the background. The vision that we know from other testimonies extends out from the window: crowded streets, emaciated children, corpses on the sidewalks. But that is not what is most important in this entry. What is essential is the appraisal. Those who are traveling on this tram are not “passengers,”

316 The largest number of cases of disease came in October 1941 (3,438), but that is just official data; it was common practice to hide disease. Estimates are that, during the second epidemic wave, between 100,000 and 110,000 people fell ill. See B. Engelking, J. Leociak, Getto warszawskie. Przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście (Warszawa 2001), 281.

317 According to a Judenrat report in November 1941, a total of 4,801 died. The greatest number of officially registered deaths in the ghetto until the start of the Grossaktion (that is, until 22 July 1942) came in August 1941 (5,560). See T. Bernstein, A. Rutkowski, “Liczba ludności żydowskiej i obszar przez nią zamieszkany w Warszawie w latach okupacji hitlerskiej,” Biuletyn ŻIH, 26 (1958), 84.

318 Because the Germans were reducing allocations, soup kitchens were forced to drastically limit the number of soups handed out, from 128,000 in September to 87,000 in November 1941. See B. Engelking, J. Leociak, op. cit., 305. In August of that year, Leyb Goldin wrote his moving essay on hunger.
but “onlookers,” a term that contains within itself an assessment of the attitudes taken by those looking through the tram window. One would like to say: they are not so much looking, as thoughtlessly gawking. The author accused “several dozen thousand onlookers,” crossing through the ghetto every day, of lacking reflection.

Accounts written post factum have an entirely different status. Their contents had been passed through the filter of memory, in which what was most poignant, but what was also most stereotypical and schematic, have become embedded and belong to the sphere of collective imagination. Postwar testimonies are dominated not by description, but by evaluation. Let me refer to two examples of memoirs, whose authors represent two extremely different political orientations.

First, Ferdynand Goetel: a widely-read interwar writer; an associate of the nationalist-rightist Prosto z Mostu; a speaker at meetings of Bolesław Piasecki’s ONR-Falanga (National Radical Camp – Phalanx) and a sympathizer of Italian fascism; during the occupation, head of the Rada Główna Opiekuńcza (Central Welfare Council); with the approval of authorities in the Polskie Państwo Podziemne (Polish Underground State), a member of the delegation of observers invited by the Germans to assist in the exhumation of the victims of the Katyn massacre. Pursued by the communists, Goetel spent all of 1945 in hiding in a Kraków monastery, after which he fled to the West, first to Italy then to London. And second, Zygmunt Zaremba: one of the most prominent leaders of the Polish Socialist Party; in September 1939, co-organizer of the Workers’ Battalions for the defense of Warsaw; during the occupation, co-creator of the underground party of Freedom, Equality, Independence; throughout the entire period of the Warsaw Uprising, editor of Robotnik; pursued by the Urząd Bezpieczeństwa (Secret Police, UB), he fled to France in 1946.

In his work Czas wojny (Time of War, 1955), Goetel wrote:

The enclosure of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto was a long and drawn-out process, one which led to their absolute separation – on the eve of the destruction of the ghetto - from the Polish city. The longest lasting gap was part of Muranów, through which a tram line ran to Żoliborz. I went there almost every day. The tram did not stop in the ghetto, but it did not progress through the area unrestricted, since those streets at the time were packed with people driven into the ghetto, with crippled children and feeble old people wandering into the tram’s path. I paid careful attention to the image of this quarter. Muranów definitely belonged to the poorest part of the ghetto. Deeper, in the middle of Nalewki, the image was apparently less terrifying. Around Zielna Street there was said to have been, for some time, a kind of plutocratic neighborhood with elegant stores and cafés. Paupers showed up there as street beggars and died at the steps of the night cafés. But in Muranów, poverty was right at home. Over time I had to witness the most terrible things, but I had never seen a dying city and I probably never will again. The ghetto
buildings looked like they had been hit by the plague. Stores peered at the street with blind window displays. One in five lanterns lit up at dusk. Uncollected trash was piling up on the sidewalks. Broken window panes were repaired with newspaper and rags. And the people? In juxtaposition to theirs, our faces, the faces of the tram passenger, our clothes, washed hands and shave faces, seemed somehow shameful. More than once in these times, a person had to ask the question if he had the right to live in a human way, to care about maintaining those aspects of human dignity that had been left to him. Later, in the rubble of all of Warsaw, the question would arise whether it was not shameful to be alive at all, whether life was not a matter worthy of contempt.319

In Goetel’s words, we see a clear indication of a narrative situation: observation of the ghetto through a tram window. The images over which the observer swept his eyes are highly valorized, as evidenced by the chosen vocabulary and metaphors. One thing that deserves particular attention is the metaphor of dying (the ghetto as a dying city) and the metaphor of disease (ghetto buildings hit by the plague). But what is perhaps most telling is the author’s juxtaposition of the faces of passengers (Poles) with the faces of those on the street (Jews).

In Zygmunt Zaremba’s Wojna i konspiracja (War and Conspiracy), we read:

Only with a look could one express compassion and swear an oath in one’s heart that such mistreatment of people would not go unpunished. There was a corridor through the ghetto where a tram ran. Through the tram car window it was possible to get a glimpse into the place where the last torment of Polish Jewry was happening. I travelled through this corridor and I still have in my mind’s eye the image of an SS-man standing arrogantly, legs apart, and a group of children staring from a distance at the passing tram. The German’s pink mug and the gray little faces with large, sunken eyes looking for mercy. This image was for me a glaring illustration of the increasingly horrifying stories emerging from behind the wall.320

This recollection begins by conjuring up a look into the ghetto, one that defines the witness’s condition. But it is not a neutral look, and it is not a thoughtless look. Zaremba is not merely gawking through the tram car window; rather, he is looking in a particular way. This recollection of a tram ride through the ghetto is embedded in an evaluative discourse, which serves above all as an expression of moral judgment of reality. Here, the factual-graphical report gives way to metamorphosed images (the look takes us “into the place where the last torment of Polish Jewry was happening”), or to an axiologically motivated juxtaposition of the appearance of perpetrators and victims (the German with his pink mug and the children’s gray little faces). Viewing the ghetto through the window of an

319 Goetel, Czasy wojny, 84-85.
320 Zaremba, Wojna i konspiracja, 200.
Aryan tram was the only way one could “express compassion” for the Jews, but also led to accepting the obligation to make sure the perpetrators did not escape punishment. In this sense, looking crosses over into the domain of empathy and moral duty.

Let us now switch to the other end of the perspective gained from the tram moving along the street. How was the Aryan tram remembered not by the passenger, who was sitting inside the tram, but by the pedestrian; not by the observer, but by the observed? Pola Rotszyld put it in unusually harsh terms:

But soon the “other side” became a kind of legend, a land of fairy tales. When trams came through, people from the other side looked at us like monkeys in a zoo cage. They were pleased. Because they too had always wished everything bad for the Jews, though they did not expect such luck.321

What is striking is the dissonance between the accounts provided by Zaremba and Pola Rotszyld. But the impression of painful contrast is less deep when we remember other entries described above, which were dominated by feelings of distance, foreignness, the exotic.

In the passages cited above, accounts of travel through the ghetto are not so much about what passengers saw through the window, as about how they looked (that is, how they did the looking). But they are also about the question if, and to what extent, we (as we try ourselves to look at the ghetto) are similar to them. What we are thus dealing with here is an attempt to get at the essence of the Holocaust experience, to grasp the conditions under which it is possible to approach the Holocaust, to reveal one of the formulas of this experience.

If we turn the topography of the so-called Jewish residential quarter into an object of research, then we are faced with the cognitive challenge posed by the experience of the ghetto as a space, or rather by the experience of the space-after-the-ghetto. We are faced with a kind of hermeneutics of an empty space.

We sometimes come upon comparisons between the destroyed Warsaw Ghetto and Pompeii. Nothing could be more mistaken. Let me first point out something that is obvious and no one questions, namely that the events that wiped Pompeii and the ghetto from the face of the earth were radically different; the two spaces were met by entirely different kinds of annihilation. Second, any similarity between what “remained” of Pompeii – covered in ash and discovered much later by archeologists – and what “remained” of the ghetto is only a matter of appearance. Pompeii exists in its ruins; material evidence has remained in the wake of the city’s destruction; there is a physical record of the drama that

321 Archiwum Yad Vashem, relacja E/438E/19-2-4, p. 37.
has been preserved for centuries. A record which, when we touch the stones of Pompeii, is accessible and legible, and which – through its material existence – manifests a kind of continuity over time, a bond between the past and the present. The Warsaw Ghetto no longer exists; rather, it is something that one might call space-after-the-ghetto. In no way did this space congeal, it did not “stop in time.” Nothing – at least almost nothing – was preserved. It is not fixed in material that was imprinted by that event. Indeed, it was purged of that event and filled with something else.

One thus cannot view this space-after-the-ghetto as falling under the Pompeii model. Pompeii is fossilized testimony to its ancient catastrophe, which we are able to read from its remains, its remnants. But the space-after-the-ghetto is a non-existence, an absence. It is a particular experience “of the space itself, and yet of a completely other space,” an experience of true absence, only ostensibly filled in.

The destruction of the ghetto was not the destruction of space. That space has remained, but it is empty (though it has been built over with apartment buildings and business complexes), it is stripped bare and dead (though it is buzzing with life). The space survived, though it is somehow hollow, bereft of “content,” of an “interior.” The ghetto that was here succumbed to annihilation, but that “here” remained; it was just eclipsed by another presence. The frames stayed behind, which now contain another reality; a topographical point remained, a cartographic abstraction.

Broadly speaking, the hermeneutic project of the empty space-after-the-ghetto involves three things. First, the hermeneutics of the space itself, and not the written text, testimonies, accounts, and personal documents. Second – the experience of topography as text. In the hermeneutic process, one can look for support in the texts of testimonies, but the space of perception and understanding takes up an area that is much larger. Third and finally – the spatial experience marked (or affected) by the Holocaust; ways of grasping this experience, the possibilities to relate, represent and understand this experience. The next steps in the hermeneutic process can be presented in the following way:

Superimposition and co-presence. This is a kind of expanded vision: I see what is, and simultaneously what is not. In other words: I go by tram down today’s Solidarność Avenue (the old Leszno Street), and while so doing I try to imagine what passengers on the Aryan tram saw as they rode through the ghetto along Leszno Street. This situation starts a thought process. We begin to research the nature of superimposed images – real and reconstructed (imagined) images – which themselves enter into manifold relations with one another, whose character needs to be captured, revealed, represented.
An act of filling in. When we venture into the hermeneutics of an empty space, we must above all carry out an act of filling in. The process of understanding assumes the existence of an object to be understood. In our case, it is not so much about its existence, as about its intelligibility – about whether it can be conceived, fathomed. In other words: we are faced with a fundamental question about whether that emptiness (in the wake of the ghetto) can be filled in at all, whether it can be encompassed by understanding, permeated by meaning. Here, we are touching upon the enormous issue of whether it is possible at all to understand the Holocaust. Not wanting to mull this over too much, I will invoke two contexts of thought that correspond to the concept of the empty space as an object of understanding. The first context is the negative hermeneutics of the ghetto as practiced by Piotr Matywiecki, who entwines the elusiveness of the ghetto with a network of incongruities and antitheses. He places himself in a kind of crevice of existence, between the ghetto (to which he does not have access) and the after-the-ghetto reality (from which he feels disinherited). He wants to be there, but he cannot be there; he does not want to be here, but he must be here. The second context involves a conception of the Holocaust as an aporia of meaning, an absence of meaning. Cynthia Ozick gave this approach powerful expression when she spoke of a common desire to make redemptive sense of the monstrosity that was the Holocaust, since one simply cannot endure the idea that the suffering and death of so many innocent people could lack such sense. But, according to Ozick, the experience of the Holocaust is precisely a confrontation with senselessness, with the absence of meaning. The Holocaust has no message for us, except one – that it could happen again.

To unveil, to reveal – the classic hermeneutic activity. The space-after-the-ghetto is empty because the reality that had made up the ghetto was annihilated, leaving no trace behind. What little remained of buildings and small fragments of cobblestone were just the exceptions that proved the rule, which was – absence. But that empty space-after-the-ghetto has been filled in, or – to put it another way – it is an obscured after-the-ghetto reality. In a sense, it has been appropriated by everything that grew out of the after-the-ghetto. Thus, by applying a layer of memory and imagination onto the empty space-after-the-ghetto, we

323 I am thinking here about her statement during a discussion in which, in addition to Ozick, R. Hilberg, A. Appelfeld and S. Friedländer took part. See Writing and the Holocaust, ed. B. Lang (New York 1988), 277-284.
contribute to the process of unveiling its hidden presence, and revealing its concealed meaning.

The experience of the space-after-the-ghetto is paradoxical in nature. It involves giving expression to the emptiness, extracting traces and remains from non-existence, from underneath the heaps of ignorance, indifference, and oblivion. This experience is accompanied by a particular kind of separation of vision, an expansion of vision, a dual perspective. Thus I begin to see what I do not see (an imagined reconstruction of the ghetto); but I no longer see what I see (reality perceived here and now). So, on the one hand, we have a situation marked by the suspension of reality. The topography of contemporary Muranów is enclosed in brackets; it becomes a kind of transparent curtain that covers the true object of our experience. On the other hand, the not-present is made present; that which exists only in the order of memory, or imagination, is made real.

Let us return to the trip through the ghetto by Aryan tram. Passengers move through a kind of aerial corridor. Space twists and turns. They find themselves in the ghetto, and yet they are separate from it. There are in some sort of space between, neither here nor there. Their participation was – to the extent that it could be – an experience of being in the middle (of the ghetto) and simultaneously on the outside, alongside; being here and, at the same time, somewhere else. This situation seems to nicely reflect the paradoxical nature of the hermeneutics of the empty space-after-the-ghetto. We can thus treat it as a metaphor for our scholarly investigation, our attempts to get at the reality of the Holocaust, to understand the Holocaust.

What connects us with the passengers of that Aryan tram, it would seem, is the experience of separation, of the existence of a kind of curtain – or rather a clear pane of glass – along which our gaze slides. We are apparently very close, but we are in fact terribly far away. Everything seems remote, strange, indeed exotic; it cannot be grasped by thought, it cannot be touched with sight. Everything escapes somewhere, like that Carmelite church in Leszno Street. Iwaszkiewicz saw it in 1941, and we see it today. But that remnant is not in its place, but off to one side! In December 1962, in connection with the expansion of the old Leszno Street (which, as General Karol Świerczewski Avenue, became part of Warsaw’s new “Trasa W-Z”), the church, which had been lifted from its foundations and put on wheels, was moved 21 meters to the north. Thus it is not where it was, it is where it was not. As such, the church on Leszno Street becomes a link in the chain of paradoxes of the empty space-after-the-ghetto.

In the end, let us cite two more records describing tram trips through this same part of Warsaw, but before the war. Zofia Kirkor-Kiedroniowa remembered the day before the Miracle on the Vistula, Józef Piłsudski’s famous maneuver
to outflank the Bolsheviks, carried out on 16 August 1920 at the Wieprz River, which forced the Red Army to retreat from Warsaw.

On this beautiful holiday day (Assumption of Mary) I went to Ochota [district of Warsaw] to visit my sister-in-law. As I returned to the tram stop, I saw something so frightening that it froze me in my tracks: along Grójecka Street they were moving heavy cannon and crates of ammunition out of Warsaw. What could this mean? Were they intending to give up Warsaw? I walked further with difficulty. Riding on the tram through the Jewish quarter, I witnessed with horror and anger crowds of Jews talking with great excitement and not in the least hiding their joy.324

The country’s fate was hanging in the balance. A country that had just regained its independence after years of bondage. The Bolsheviks were approaching the gates of Warsaw. The threat that Poland would once again be wiped from the map of Europe was written into the Catholic liturgical calendar (The Assumption of Mary, Święto Matki Boskiej Zielnej). Three years later that day for remembering the Battle of Warsaw would become “Święto Żołnierza” (effectively, like America’s Memorial Day). At the same time, “crowds of Jews” in the Jewish quarter were not hiding their joy. Quite clearly, they were waiting for the Bolsheviks. It was difficult to imagine a more ostentatious manifestation of foreignness and hostility. Zofia Kirkor-Kiedroniowa did not have, and could not have, anything in common with the world that she saw through the tram window.

In one of his reports from the late 1930s, Franciszek Lewicki wrote:

For 20 groszy, a crowded number 16 takes me into an unknown, prehistoric world. Beyond Mirowski Square, beyond Chłodna Street, we start to plunge slowly into a wave of time; the restless surface of the twentieth century closes above our heads; and through the tram window, as if from a deep sea ship, I see, amazed, deeper and deeper layers of time. Here, life descends to earth. Warsaw, elevated in the center, begins to fall away, to shrink, to decline. Wolska Street continues to extend along the border, but there are more gaps and passages in it, and every turn opens up a wider, unobstructed horizon.325

Lewicki brought to the surface that which, in texts written during the occupation, was most often merely suggested. The description of his tram ride has an explicit metaphorical dimension. The tram car assumes the character of a deep sea ship dropping its passengers down into another world. What we have here is

a clear situation of separation, of foreignness. And – in a way that is truly prophetic – the above passage from the interwar report anticipated the tram trips that Aryan passengers would later take in transit through the wartime ghetto, though it anticipated not what they would see, but how they would look (that is, how they would do the looking).