4 Encounters with a Corpse

The point of departure for these considerations is the many different events that can be defined, in abbreviated form, as an “encounter with a corpse,” which has a special place in the broader space of a person’s encounter with death. I want to focus my attention not on the various dimensions of the experience with death, but on corpses, because what interests me here is not so much the process of dying as the effect of dying – that is, the corpse. By “encounter with a corpse” I mean the ways – embedded in cultural patterns and subject to social regulation – in which human corpses are treated, the attitudes and images that are associated with them, and the language that is used to talk about them. The number of forms these encounters take is huge, though it seems that, at the foundation of all of them, is a fundamental, indeed primal, experience with taboo and an ambivalence that stems from that experience. The corpse is unclean, disgusting, subject to hideous decomposition. At the same time, it is fascinating, alluring, and attractive. Repulsion seems healthy and normal, culturally embedded in well-lighted areas. Attraction is concealed, stifled, pushed down into areas marked by perversion and darkness.

One of the oldest and most expressive descriptions of an ambivalent encounter with a corpse is the story that we find in book IV of Plato’s Republic:

Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from the Piraeus along the outside of the North Wall when he saw some corpses lying at the executioner’s feet. He had an appetite

594 George Bataille has written about the taboos involving the dead and death that originate in prehistoric times: “The essential difference is that between a man’s dead body and other objects such as stones. […] We perceive the transition from the living state to the corpse, that is, to the tormenting object that the corpse of one man is for another. For each man who regards it with awe, the corpse is the image of his own destiny. It bears witness to a violence which destroys not one man alone but all men in the end. The taboo which lays hold on the others at the sight of a corpse is the distance they put between themselves and violence, by which they cut themselves off from violence.” See Georges Bataille, Erotism: Death & Sensuality, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 44. Louis-Vincent Thomas stated that, “in the face of the hideous, our phantasms [associated with the corpse – J. L.] are organized according to a dynamic that juxtaposes the clean with the dirty, the beautiful with the ugly, the unblemished with the blemished, the hard and indestructible with the soft, which is easily destroyed […].” See Trup. Od biologii do antropologii, trans. K. Kocjan (Łódź 1980), 78.
to look at them but at the same time he was disgusted and turned away. For a time, he struggled with himself and covered his face, but, finally, overpowered by the appetite, he pushed his eyes wide open and rushed towards the corpses, saying “Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight!”

In the biological order, every one of us is moving inevitably toward such an encounter.

Without fail, it happens when we stand at the border between life and death, and when – subject to that great transformation – we leave our body behind and enter into the new reality of a corpse. In the cultural order, since ancient times, we deal with the encounter with the corpse with a variety of death rituals and funeral ceremonies. The object of my reflections here is not the experience itself, but its description, its various representations. Through this description – verbal or iconic – I attempt to access the content that lies behind representations (subject to analysis) of the experience of interest to me here. It is thus about mimesis of the encounter, about its suitably organized (textual or pictorial) equivalent.

From among the many forms of description of the encounter with a corpse we can distinguish two polar types: first, the encounter that is accidental, unpredictable, sudden and violent, shocking, one that disrupts the normal course of life; and second, the encounter that is prepared, organized, reconciled and included in the culturally defined system of behavior. The first type includes both “unwanted” encounters, which only later might turn into intentional participation (this is precisely what happened to Leontius, and we see such a description in Baudelaire’s “The Carcass”), and “wanted” encounters, when onlookers move toward the location of a catastrophe in order to get a glimpse of the victims. In the 1940s and 1950s, Mell Kilpatrick photographed car crashes in the American countryside, and one of the motifs of his photos involved people gathered around the bodies pulled from the wreck. The second type is made up of various kinds of funeral rituals and behaviors toward the corpse as preserved in culture. Included in these culturally reconciled encounters are, no doubt, the danse macabre, contemplation of the threatening and rotting corpse – the transi, and the prototype of the experience under discussion here, namely that of “The

596 See M. Kilpatrick, Car Crashes and Other Sad Stories (Taschen 2000).
597 For a monographic outline of the matter of the funeral and mourning based on testimony from various cultures, see Alfonso Maria Di Nola, La morte trionfata: Antropologia del lutto (Newton Compton 1995). For the Polish version, see Tryumf śmierci. Antropologia żałoby, ed. M. Woźniak, trans. J. Korecka et al. (Kraków 2006).
Three Dead Kings” (or “The Three Living and the Three Dead”), in which three riders come upon three open coffins and the decaying corpses inside.\(^{598}\)

From the multitude of possibilities, I have chosen the following situations and their associated discourses: the postmortem dissection; encounters with corpses in the trenches of World War I in Flanders and in the camps of the Gulag Archipelago in Kolyma; and violations of the funeral ceremony in the reality of the Warsaw Ghetto.

**The Postmortem Dissection**

Descartes devoted more than half of part V of his *Discourse on Method* to reflections on anatomy. The object of his meticulous commentary is the functioning of the heart and the circulatory system, the extensive network of veins and arteries, the directions of blood circulation, and above all – the mystery behind the mechanism that sets this whole complex system in motion. In the introduction, he wrote that he wanted “to place here the explanation of the movement of the heart and of the arteries,” and he advised his readers:

> I would like those who are not at all versed in anatomy to take the trouble, before reading this, to have the heart of some large animal that has lungs dissected in their presence (for such a heart is in all respects sufficiently similar to that of a man) […]\(^{599}\)

A natural source for gaining an understanding of the laws governing the workings of the human organism was, for the French philosopher, the postmortem. There is nothing extraordinary about this. Methods for opening up corpses already had, in Descartes’ day, a long tradition; we need only recall the animal dissections performed by Galen (120–200) and the medical works of Avicenna (980–1037). The postmortem, performed sporadically in the Middle Ages, became highly popular in the Renaissance; it represented one of the ways to cultivate the revitalized study of the human being. Contrary to common belief today, the postmortem in medieval and Renaissance Europe was not associated with something dark, was not associated with the breaking of taboo, and was not seen as violating the integrity of the corpse. In those days, opening the body of a dead person in an odor of sanctity – with the goal of conserving the body or, in the case of deceased members of high-ranking families, quickly removing perishable

\(^{598}\) On the origins of various versions and meanings of this tale, see Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear*.

internal organs when it was necessary to transport them a long distance – was accepted.⁶⁰⁰ A taboo surrounding the postmortem emerged only in the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century, autopsies could be performed freely. Foucault wrote: “So there was no shortage of corpses in the eighteenth century, no need to rob graves or to perform anatomical black masses; one was already in the full light of dissection.”⁶⁰¹ Dissections took place in large auditoriums filled with viewers, as in a Vienna clinic in 1754 or in the classicistic amphitheater at l’École de Chirurgie, built in 1769–1775 and crowned with an enormous cupola.

Dissections were performed in public. The first such demonstration is presumed to have taken place at the University of Bologna under Professor Mondino de Luzzi (1276–1326), who did his work on the body of a convict, a common practice at the time. The Florentine physician Antonio Benivieni (ca. 1443–1502) performed twenty dissections that he described in a treatise published after his death entitled De abditis nonnullis ac mirandis morborum et sanationum causis.⁶⁰² A particularly spectacular dissection was performed in 1540 in Bologna, in the presence of as many as two hundred students, by Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564), one of the fathers of modern anatomy and author of the monumental set of books entitled De humani corporis fabrica libri septum (1543). This work was illustrated with superb woodcuts that are now a part of art history. Such great artists as Michelangelo participated in dissections, as did Leonardo da Vinci, the genius creator of famous anatomical drawings who himself “performed dissections on more than thirty male and female corpses of almost every age.”⁶⁰³

In his Historia Corporis Humani sive Anatomice, Alessandro Benedetti (1450–1512) included a description of the principles behind how an anatomical

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⁶⁰⁰ See A. Wieczorkiewicz, Muzeum ludzkich ciał. Anatomia spojrzenia (Gdańsk 2000), 71–73.
⁶⁰¹ Michel Foucault, The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception (Vintage, 1994), 125.
⁶⁰² See A. Wieczorkiewicz, op. cit., 73–76. Benivieni described, among other things, the case of one A. Bruno, who was not able to take food and died of hunger. It was for the public good – as Benivieni emphasized – that the body was opened. The dissection showed that the entrance to the dead person’s stomach was closed, which made it impossible for food to enter the gastrointestinal tract. It was worth considering the diagnostic and educational value of the postmortem. For more on Benivieni’s treatise, see I. Carr, http://www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/medicine/units/history/lesion/lesion3.html (accessed 25 May 2008).
⁶⁰³ Such was how Don Antonio de Beatis, secretary to the Cardinal of Aragon, wrote about Leonardo. Quote from F. Lebrun, “Jak dawniej leczono,” in A. Wieczorkiewicz, op. cit., 134.
spectacle should proceed; indeed, he provided a kind of scenario. As a civilized person, Benedetti did not recommend opening the bodies of living people, which is what barbarians would do. For people taught to explore nature’s secrets, corpses were enough. The body should be carefully chosen, middle-aged, with a solid frame – so that it could serve as good dissection material and could be easily visible to participants in the spectacle. Which is why Benedetti recommended that a well-lighted table be placed in the center of the room. Viewers were to be seated according to their positions in society, their social status, and in a way that protected the “masters of the scalpel” from being crowded by interested observers. The author did not forget matters tied to the maintenance of order: “it is necessary to set up guards in order to prevent feverish crowds from pushing into the center,” and to organize someone who would collect money to fund the spectacle’s essential needs. The dissection would best take place in winter, Benedetti argued, since the cold would prevent the corpse from succumbing to rapid decomposition. Another practical suggestion was based on similar motives, namely that the length of the demonstration be set so that it could be completed “before the dissection material succumbed to decay.”

By 1637, when the Discourse on Method was published, Descartes had lived in Holland for eight years, including in Leiden, whose university was founded in 1572 through funds provided by William I, Prince of Orange in recognition of the perseverance of the city’s residents during the year-long Spanish siege. Leiden was also famous for its theatrum anatomicum. I am aware of three illustrations of the anatomical theater, which Descartes no doubt visited. One of these illustrations is entitled “Anatomical Lecture in Leiden at the time of Doctor Pauw” and dated 1609. It shows a crowd of viewers packed into amphitheater benches forming concentric circles around the dissection table. The anatomist with his assistant stands before the open corpse with one hand held over a book lying on the table next to him, and with the other hand holding an organ extracted from the body. In the tool cabinet situated above the head of the man performing the dissection, an open compass is visible, and among the viewers there are skeletons holding banners with Latin inscriptions. A view of Leiden stretches across the top of the illustration, along with the university’s seal. A year later, another illustration presents the same theater, except this time there are practically no people. There is a dissected body on the table, alongside which stand two men who look like anatomists. One of them is lifting the sheet that
covers the corpse. They are being watched by human and animal skeletons. The few visitors in the theater, apparently there to view a museum exhibition, do not seem especially interested in the anatomical demonstration. A third and anonymous illustration comes from the year 1700 showing the anatomical theater with an empty dissection table and with skeletons and human anatomical models arranged throughout the benches, all of which is being viewed by a handful of visitors. It looks as if, sometime over the course of the seventeenth century, the anatomical theater in Leiden was abandoned.

But public dissections did not at all come to an end. They simply evolved. The act of opening up a dead body slowly lost its character as a half-medical, half-religious ritual, one that called forth shivers of unhealthy fascination and took place within the conventions of an amphitheater, attracting scholars and students, but also onlookers of all kinds (including women). Increasingly, the anatomist leading the dissection, as the master of ceremonies revealing the secrets of the human body (that perfect piece of art created by the Divine architect), was transformed into an anatomopathologist. More than ever, dissections in the nineteenth century were marked by professionalism and medicalization. With the increased use of photography for medical purposes and standardization in anatomical illustrations, images of the human interior were relatively easy to create and distribute. The circle of those viewing an autopsy was made up of select medical practitioners, and the demonstration itself was more often a closed event taking place not in an amphitheater with organized seating, but in dedicated spaces in medical clinics and academies, which resembled laboratories equipped with several dissection tables and sophisticated equipment. That having been said, some modern dissection rooms have maintained the specific architecture of the old anatomical theaters.605

The Leiden illustrations of the theatrum anatomicum illustrate several significant features of old postmortems. Let me point them out and systematize their most important qualities.

Above all, there is the spectacular nature of the event, its grandeur, the presence of the public made up of professionals, amateurs and simple onlookers.

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605 On the increasing professionalization of the postmortem performed by emotionally distant and proficient technicians, and the transfer of the operation itself from open spaces for the public to specialized, closed spaces, see Kemp and Wallace, Spectacular Bodies, 17-19, 31. See photos of an American morgue where postmortems take place equipped with modern research tools in B. Innes, Granice śmierci, trans. M. Bernacki, E. Krzak-Cwiertnia (Warszawa 1999), 51. The anatomical theater at the University of Padua exhibits the old architecture; see photos in A. Wieczorkiewicz, op. cit., 86-87.
In such places as Leiden the act of dissection became a public spectacle. The many gathered viewers took part in a moving anatomy lecture, which took on the character of a ritual act, which – by its very nature – revealed the deep secrets of the human body. The theatricalization is significant, the event's thought-out arrangement of the space in which the dissection played out, which appears to have reshaped an anatomical demonstration into a carnival-like spectacle, in the full anthropological sense of that concept. In this spectacle, two orders came into contact: the scientific (activities that were cognitive and educational in the context of anatomy) and the ceremonial (movement toward the border of cultural and religious taboo, occupying the space of divine competence with regard to final matters, including the secrets of life and death). Scalpel in hand, the anatomist is not just a common physician, but a medical priest who reveals the divine architecture of the human being. He makes explicit what was hidden. Like a guide in the middle of a dark forest, he leads others through the intricate labyrinths of the human interior. In this context, anatomy becomes part art, part “natural theology” of a kind. At least since the Renaissance and until the nineteenth century, the dominant belief was that the goal of a public dissection and the preparation of anatomical images of the human body involved not just

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606 On the theatricalization and carnival-like nature of anatomical demonstrations, A. Wieczorkiewicz wrote: “Just like when a stage play was being considered, people took care to correctly reproduce a spectacle, to appropriately divide the event into separate phases, and the final form of the spectacle was to be subordinated to the norms of decorum. In some [anatomy] theaters, the spectacles were accompanied by music. Viewers had to follow certain rules regarding appropriate behavior. Sometimes they had to pay for admission. The famous Parisian professor of anatomy, Ch. Estienne, who - in a textbook on the theory and practice of anatomy – devoted one chapter to a description of the ideal place for anatomical demonstrations to take place, repeatedly using theatrical terminology, sometimes directly referring to ancient theater (for example when he said that the anatomy table should be placed at the front of the theater, in a place where the ancients set the scene). […] The spectacle reached its peak in the eighteenth century. The anatomical theater was decorated with damask and thoroughly illuminated. […] There was one more spectacular feature of this ceremony. Anatomy was presented in Bologna (and in some other cities) during the carnival. Winter favored the conservation of the corpse. […] It was considered correct […] to attend anatomy lessons during the carnival – while the people of Bologna, their faces hidden behind masks and with music playing in the theater, could watch anatomy at work, not always understanding the Latin explanations. The anatomy lesson here took on a new dimension. The lecture was simultaneously a show - and the show was a carnival-like spectacle.” See Wieczorkiewicz, op. cit., 84-85, 88-89.
medical knowledge strictly defined, but also the art of understanding the beauty and perfection of creation. Visible nature, which can be subjected to analysis on the dissection table and whose structure can be presented to the public, contains within itself a reflection of the divine order of things, an order that is accessible to human reason.607

The iconography of the anatomical theater at Leiden is embedded with a particular set of symbols (including an open book, the images of Adam and Eve in the form of skeletons, an open compass), which lead us toward the deeper meanings behind the dissection spectacle. The highly powerful symbolism of the open book points to the authority of science, but also the “book of the living” or the “book of life,” about which the psalmists wrote (Psalms 69:29), as did the prophets Isaiah (Isaiah 4:3) and Daniel (Daniel 12:1), and St. John in Revelation (Revelation 3:5). In this Book, before we even existed, our entire life was written, and on the last day it will be opened so that everyone can be “judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works” (Revelation 20:12). The “Book of life” is not the same as Book of the Seven Seals maintained by the Apocalyptic Lamb (Revelation 5:1). The Book on the dissection table contains a kind of dual symbolism: of the highest conceptual values, a depository of truth accessible to reason, and of that which is most sacred, the revelation of divine mysteries, and it was in this dual aura that dissections took place. The figures of Adam and Eve evoke the biblical history of human beings – from sin to salvation. The open compass is one of the symbolic elements of cabalism and freemasonry, a shape resembling the letter “A” signifies the beginning of all things. It appears in allegories involving geometry, architecture, and justice; it is an emblematic presentation of the act of creation and a symbol of the divine architect – the creator of man. The anatomist at Leiden is positioned directly under the open compass, which one can interpret as the highest consent and sanction for the penetration of the human interior. The open compass creates the form of a triangle, which also serves as a symbol of the triune God. The triangle as a Manichaeistic symbol of the Holy Trinity was at first rejected by the Church, but it was later assimilated; since the Middle Ages, the triangle symbolizing the Holy Trinity has appeared in connection with other symbols (the hand of god, the Eye of Providence, doves).608
Another feature of the dissection that needs to be emphasized is the act of opening a dead human body, itself. We can omit a discussion of the history of funeral rituals (and other ceremonies associated with death) in which the practice of opening a corpse for embalming has long played a role, because what is central here is the motif of opening a body as a drastic violation of the border between that which is inside a person and that which is outside—the surface of the body as the display for internal emotions, thoughts, and the condition of the soul. From the perspective of cultural anthropology, one can view the dissection as a crossing (or, more bluntly, a breaking through) of the threshold of that which serves as the soul’s house.

Ancient Orphic wise men treated the body as the soul’s prison; they even called it the soul’s coffin, which was repeated in almost identical form by one of the Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-ca. 215). St. Augustine softened this antagonism, writing about the beauty and harmony of the body, designated as the soul’s dwelling place. Modern times have been dominated by Cartesian dualism. According to Descartes, the human being is made up of two irreducible substances: thinking substance without extension (that is, souls) and extended substance lacking consciousness. They are opposed to one another, and one has no influence on the other. The soul only resides in the human body—specifically, in a small gland located in the brain called the pineal gland (conarium).609 The body is just an unconscious mechanism; one might say, a “soulless machine.” The Catholic Church teaches that in death, which is the separation of the soul from the body, the human body is destroyed and the soul passes on to an encounter with God. But at the moment of Resurrection, God grants incorruptible life to our bodies, reuniting them with their souls (Catechism of the Catholic Church, § 997). Only in light of this perspective does the full meaning of the topos of the body as the soul’s dwelling place become apparent,610 and the postmortem dissection takes on the quality of a transgressive experience.

No one can see or touch his own heart. Similarly, no one can see the heart of another person without violating his bodily covering. The body’s border, whether marked out by nature or defined by the Creator, is guarded by many

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610 See the entry “Ciało ludzkie” in Encyklopedia katolicka (Lublin 1985), vol. 3, k. 440-447. On the anthropological significance of transgressing the border of the body and of opening the body, see A. Wieczorkiewicz, op. cit., 70-75.
cultural and religious norms. Marsyas, flayed by Apollo, is transfixed by the form of his suffering, which arouses both horror and disgust. Which is perhaps why many artistic representations of this subject avoid literality. For example, Titian’s painting (1570–1576) shows the preparations for the execution, and in José de Ribera’s painting, Apollo is holding the prostrate Marsyas by the legs as he begins to remove his skin. The face of this master of the aulos is contorted by a monstrous scream. In his poem, Zbigniew Herbert revealed for us the internal landscape of the screaming Marsyas, who relates:

nieprzebrane bogactwo
swego ciała
łysze góry wątroby
pokarmów białe wąwozy
szumiące lasy płuc
słodkie pagórki mięśni
stawy żółć krew i dreszcze
zimowy wiatr kości
nad solą pamięci.

nieprzebrané bogactvo
tswego ciała
łysie góry wątroby
pokarmów biale wąwozy
szumiace lasy płuc
słowkie pagórki mięśni
stawy żółć krew i dreszcze
zimowy wiatr kości
nad solą pamięci.

the inexhaustible wealth
of his body
bald mountains of his liver
white ravines of aliment
rustling forests of his lungs
sweet hillocks of his muscles
joints bile blood and shudders
the wintry wind of his bones
over the salt of memory*


But the anatomist is able to remove the heart from a body and show it to the viewers. Their gaze falls upon areas that are closed to the human eye; it follows a complicated and multi-stage process by which the body’s barrier is crossed: pulling the skin from the torso, removing the tissue, splitting the sternum and twelve pairs of ribs, opening the chest cavity and preparation of subsequent layers of the pleura, mediastinum, pericardium, to finally get at the heart. Participation is such a spectacle caused shudders of horror and excitement; it was accompanied by an awareness that the fundamental taboo that surrounds death and the corpse had been broken. During the autopsy, we all but literally enter the insides of a dead body while remaining on the outside. We extend our control over the corpse, which arouses a primal reaction of horror and repulsion. We look into the face of death in order to extract from death the secrets of life. The corpse is tamed; it is subordinated and harnessed in the service of science. Under the scalpel, having unveiled its internal landscape, the corpse ends the scandal of useless decay by moving from a place marked by the dark anarchy of decomposition and into the light of knowledge, serving life. Silent forever, the corpse on the dissection table is forced to speak.
In the illustrations of the anatomical theater at Leiden, and in Rembrandt’s painting depicting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (see I; the Roman numerals indicate the number attached to the reproductions found at the end of this book), we see an open book by the dissection table. But in fact it was the corpse that was an open book, from which the master of the anatomical ceremony publicly read the divine symmetry of the human body. St. Augustine, describing the beauty and harmony of the human body, wrote about the anatomist, who – through his practices – could unveil this harmony. Though the dissection itself, according to St. Augustine, involved the “cruel zeal for science,” and even if it was true that the human’s “inward parts” would seem to “have no beauty,” those parts nonetheless contained within themselves an enticing beauty, because they are a visible sign of the perfection of God’s design.611 In an illustration adorning the title page of his *De humani corporis fabrica* and presenting a dissection performed on a woman by the master himself, Andreas Vesalius is presented as a great lecturer on anatomy and teacher reading the scriptures of the exposed viscera. One can interpret many other representations of the postmortem in terms of a kind of semiotics of the body, including an entire series of paintings depicting the anatomy lecture by such Dutch painters as Aert Pietersz (1601–1603), Jakob Adriaensz Backer (1670) (see III), Jan Van Neck (1683) with his dissection of a child (see IV), Cornelis Troost (1728), and Rembrandt with his famous *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). The dignified men gathered around the corpse demonstrate great seriousness, but also supremacy, like someone who has a way to steal long-hidden secrets and is now experiencing a moment of deserved triumph. Or someone who has found the key to deciphering a secret code. Or someone who has finally found his true teacher and leader on the path to understanding. The activities of the anatomists,


the dead, and sometimes even of sick persons who died under their knives, and have inhumanly pried into the secrets of the human body to learn the nature of the disease and its exact seat, and how it might be cured, yet those relations of which I speak, and which form the concord, or, as the Greeks call it, ‘harmony,’ of the whole body outside and in, as of some instrument, no one has been able to discover, because no one has been audacious enough to seek for them. But if these could be known, then even the inward parts, which seem to have no beauty, would so delight us with their exquisite fitness, as to afford a profounder satisfaction to the mind—and the eyes are but its ministers—than the obvious beauty which gratifies the eye,” Saint Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Hendrickson Pub., 2009), 769.
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and the artists depicting their burdens, were guided by the maxim visible above the entrance to the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: *nosce te ipsum* – know theyself. The source for knowledge of human nature is the corpse. The English anatomist Helkiah Crooke (1576–1648), an authority on medicine in the first half of the seventeenth century and author of the work *Mikrokosmographia, a Description of the Body of Man* (London, 1616), wrote that “anatomy is as it were a most certaine and sure guide to the admirable and most excellent knowledge of our selves, that is of our owne proper nature.”

The discovery of pathological anatomy was the harbinger of a new spirit in medicine. Dissection produced an image of death – to put it paradoxically – *in statu nascendi*. This new medical view of things, as Foucault claimed, made possible a perception of death that sheds light on the miracle of creation and allows us to understand life. Anatomy leads from the symptomatic surface to the depths of the unseen. It thus gradually crosses over to “the other side” of the body and reveals the mysteries of health and sickness.

With Bichat, knowledge of life finds its origin in the destruction of life and in its extreme opposite; it is at death that disease and life speak their truth: a specific, irreducible truth, protected from all assimilations to the inorganic by the circle of death that designates them for what they are. [Foucault then quotes Bichat] “Open up a few corpses: you will dissipate at once the darkness that observation alone could not dissipate.” The living night is dissipated in the brightness of death.

Rembrandt’s less famous *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Deijman* (1656) (see II) depicts a rather rare motif of the open skull of a dead man and a brain being opened. The body is laid out flat, with the feet in the forefront, and the torso, already opened, is partially covered by a white sheet. The position of the body and painting’s perspective is remarkably like what we see in Andrea Mantegna’s ingenious *Lamentation of Christ* (1490) (see V). Of course, the resemblance is not an accident. The dead person resting on the dissection table experiences, in this way, a kind of sanctification; he becomes a sacrifice on the altar of science.

The symbolic sacralization of a corpse subjected to dissection indicates a peculiar quality of the anatomical spectacle, namely its ambivalence. At least until the middle of the nineteenth century, the “dissection material” – as Alessandro Benedetti and later generations of pathologists put it – consisted of the bodies of

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613 Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 145-146.
executed convicts, people on the margins of society, the poor, the homeless. The source for corpses was thus the executioner’s dungeon, hospital, and poorhouse, such places that could provide bodies which no one cared to remember. In his treatise, Benedetti wrote plainly about these sources, which are confirmed by the statutes of universities where anatomical demonstrations were performed, and by the special privileges granted to particular faculties by officials who could thereby dispose of bodies and, through the majesty of the law, present them to anatomists.\footnote{See A. Wieczorkiewicz, op. cit., 96-97. The author refers, for example, to the Statutes of the University of Bologna from 1442, according to which municipal authorities had to provide annually two bodies originating from a territory at least thirty miles away from Bologna, in order to avoid a situation in which anatomists and students would find themselves performing postmortems on relatives or close friends. Genoa, Perugia, Pizza, Florence and Padua had similar statutes. In the middle of the sixteenth century in London, King Henry VIII extended a privilege to the College of Barbers and Surgeons (later known as The Regal College of Surgeons) according to which professors and students had the right to receive four corpses of hanged criminals each year. This privilege, including the implementation of the testament records marking the body for medical purposes, became for the College the only legal source of acquiring corpses until the nineteenth century. See V. Walter, \textit{From Body Snatching to Bequeathing}, http://www.quotesandsayings.com/findquoteframes.htm (accessed 25 May 2008).} The dead convict, stretched out on the dissection table, cut open by the scalpel and showing its insides – took on a dual role: the criminal serving his just sentence, and the sinner paying for his sins in an unbelievable act of sacrifice, a sacrificial offering made of himself. Thus, in terms of iconographic design, the body laid out on the table was tied to the symbolism of the Last Supper, and the dead criminal resembled Adam (the skeletons of Adam and Eve were present in depictions of the anatomical theater) – condemned and redeemed.\footnote{See A. Wieczorkiewicz, op. cit., 98.} The dissection thus takes on the hallmarks of a great parable about the fall and exaltation of man. The open body – twice stigmatized (first as a corpse in general, and then as the corpse of a criminal expelled to the social margins) – played a key role in the drama of understanding life and death. In this way, it moved inexorably into the sphere of ambivalence.

Let us imagine the scenery surrounding a postmortem transformed into a paratheatrical spectacle. The body of a hanged murderer is delivered to the anatomical department. In life he had caused fear, but now one can see him dead. Fear mixes with interest. Nervous movement in the gallery, murmurs of excited voices in the crowd, a table is put in the center of the room and a motionless body
is placed on it. The blade of a scalpel sinks into the cold body of waxy pallor. In
the anatomist’s hand the muscle of a human heart – pulled from an open chest,
covered with a network of veins, with a massive aortic arch and severed arterial
endings. The heart of a criminal – the heart of a person, visible for all to see. In
the crowded and stifling room, the smell of sweat and formalin, and that delicate
sweet scent of the beginnings of decomposition (we recall the recommendations
that dissections be carried out in winter and that they be limited in duration; of
course, in those days there were no cooling systems).

The awe of the corpse was mixed here with the notoriety of the convict, and
with suspicions of the moral and religious ambiguity that accompanied the
practice, of cutting open a body, itself. In Christian Europe, the admissibility
of the postmortem was limited or doubtful, given the Christian faith in the
resurrection of the body. The fear was that dismemberment of the body would
hinder that resurrection. From this perspective, the dissection was regarded
even as profanation of the corpse, which would make a normal funeral impos-
sible, and was more disgraceful than an execution. The devotional imagi-
nation offered people gruesome and grotesque scenes of a corpse, cut into
pieces, roaming around at the moment of resurrection in search of lost body
parts.\footnote{See V. Walter, op. cit. In 1300, Pope Boniface VIII issued a bull which
did not prohibit the performance of postmortems, but forbade dismembering the
body. From the theological perspective, autopsies could thus be considered a
matter of unsettled law. However, we know of acts that legalized the practice of
dissections, such as the edict issued by Emperor Frederick II in 1240 authorizing
the medical school in Salerno to perform a postmortem once every five years. See
A. Wieczorkiewicz, op. cit., 74-75.}

This is no way to remain indifferent to a corpse. Georges Bataille has written:

\begin{quote}
Violence, and death signifying violence, have a double meaning. On the one hand
the horror of death drives us off, for we prefer life; on the other an element at once solemn
and terrifying fascinates us and disturbs us profoundly. [...] Death was a sign of violence
brought into a world which it could destroy. Although motionless, the dead man had a
part in the violence which had struck him down; anything which came too near was
threatened by the destruction which had brought him low. [...] Death is a danger for
those left behind. If they have to bury a corpse it is less in order to keep it safe than to
keep themselves safe from its contagion.\footnote{Bataille, \textit{Erotism}, 45-46.}
\end{quote}

The corpse delivers us into the sphere of taboo and transgression. Once again, Bataille:
Men are swayed by two simultaneous emotions: they are driven away by terror and drawn by an awed fascination. Taboo and transgression reflect these two contradictory urges. The taboo would forbid the transgression, but the fascination compels it.\textsuperscript{618}

A series of poetic texts addressing the subject of the postmortem fall somewhere on the spectrum between contemplative, empathetic observation and horror; between sympathy and disgust; between purity and innocence and ignominity. On one end of the spectrum we have the highly valued area of beauty, and on the other end that area of experience that Julia Kristeva has called “abjection.”\textsuperscript{619}

The poem by Stanisław Grochowiak entitled “Lekcja anatomii (Rembrandta)” exudes the beauty of the old masters’ canvases, their serenity and grandeur. Both the dissection procedure itself and the corpse, as the object of anatomical analysis, are subject to aestheticization. The opening of a body resembles the pealing of a piece of fruit, which under the knife reveals its resplendent flesh. Between the anatomist, the viewers watching his work, and the dead person, there is full harmony and understanding. No violence is involved here, no brutal incursion into the interior of a dead person. On the contrary – the corpse cooperates with the anatomist with the greatest dedication. His skin and insides lose their repellent physiological qualities and become a kind of book, on whose pages are recorded the hallmarks of a past life: the imprint of emotions, the signs of suffering. Meanwhile, the activities surrounding the dissection resemble simple, everyday household tasks: dressing, washing up, winding wool. In Grochowiak’s

\textsuperscript{618} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{619} Julia Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection}, trans. Leon Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1982). One commentator on Kristeva’s thinking wrote the following: “The abject - that is, what has already been rejected - is neither a subject nor an object, but is situated between them, which is precisely what makes it insidious and dangerous. […] The abject must therefore be abandoned by the subject, concealed […] removed from the field of perception […] for its own good, meaning a stable identity […]. Kristeva emphasizes, however, that the desecrated cannot be completely destroyed or safely disconnected from itself. It is always only pushed away into an abyss from which the subject turns in a constant struggle. The subject always stands above the chasm between birth and death, beginning and end, salvation and condemnation, while the abject connects it with all that the ratio does not understand and what is avoided, i.e. with decay, fortuity and death; the abject thus blurs lines between right and the wrong, clean and scarred. […] While religion pushes aside, indeed practically forbids contact with the abject, literature, poetry and art sublimate the abject, make it acceptable – that is, they reconcile it and allow it to be alongside.” M. Bakke, \textit{Ciało otwarte. Filozoficzne reinterpretacje kulturowych wizji cielesności} (Poznań 2000), 25–27.
verse entitled “Rozbieranie do snu,” imagery of dying and decay is tied to the act of undressing for bed. The poet reaches a higher degree of aestheticization in his “Portretowanie umarłej” (Portrait of a dead woman).

A series of poems on the postmortem by Gottfried Benn leads us toward a place which is disgusting and shocking, but which is also – in a dangerous way – ambiguous, which steps beyond the boundary between what is clean and unclean, proper and improper. We see in these poems something that fits perfectly with the expressionistic aesthetics of colliding extremes, a mixture of perversely attractive beauty and abhorrence of the abominable. The body of a white woman, prepared for dissection, is illuminated by the sun, bringing out the alluring shape of her thighs and breasts, which have not yet been deformed by “vice or birth.” She looks like a drowsy fiancée, anticipating happiness. But this beautiful body is overwhelmed by the corpse of a black man, bringing disgrace upon the innocence of the feminine corpse. The illusion of beauty, harmony, and purity fades when the scalpel is put into the woman’s throat (“Negerbraut”). Another example. In the teeth of a drowned man there is a “lavender aster,” placed there by someone as a joke. As the larynx and palate are being cut open with a “long knife,” the flower falls from the corpse’s mouth and slides down into a container with the brain. The contrast between the corpse, subjected to anatomy’s full literality, and the delicate (living) flower does not end there. In the final section, it finds its new place, its “vase” – that is, its place for life, in the empty chest of the drowned man stuffed with “excelsior” (“Little Aster”). For Benn’s “dissection” poems the penetration of the territories of life and death is significant. What is probably most shocking is the example of “Beautiful Youth,” whose focus is the dissection of a young girl “who had lain for long in the rushes.” Indeed, for such a long time that little rats had nested among her insides (“under the diaphragm”). The decaying cadaver of a beautiful drowned woman is the cradle of life. But not for long. During the dissection, the animals are pulled out of their cozy home and thrown into the water.620

Let us take a closer look at the central organ of the human body – the heart. If the postmortem dissection is supposed to reveal the mysteries of life, there is no doubt that the heart (as the ancient symbol of the source of life, the habitat of feelings, but also of reason, will, and memory – that is, a person’s entire interior

along with his conscience, or in a word: the human soul) should be the focus of
the anatomist’s interest. But in graphics and paintings representing dissections,
the heart is in the background, or disappears altogether. In Rembrandt’s works,
we have a dissected arm and a trepanation of the skull with the brain exposed,
and in the work of van Neck we see the corpse of a baby with an open abdomen.
The arm – more specifically the elbow – and the knee are organs of movement,
and the mysteries of movement, its mechanisms, fascinated not only anatomists
in those days. In the era of Descartes and Isaac Newton the rhythm of philosoph-
ical discourse marked out rationalistic schemes of knowledge and mechanical
concepts to describe a broad variety of phenomena. None of the illustrations
portraying a dissection (that I know of) shows a heart. What is most often
presented is an opened abdomen or the very moment when a scalpel is applied
to the body. In one famous drawing, Andreas Vesalius shows the internal organs
of a female’s abdominal cavity. Only in a certain medieval image of a dissection
do we see an anatomist holding an organ in his hand, which had been taken out
of the corpse lying right next to him. The image contains other organs, among
which we can certainly identify a lung and intestines. But is that thing in the
anatomist’s hand really a heart?

In the above-cited Discourse on Method, Descartes devoted much of his ana-
tomical reflections to the heart, which sets in motion the entire circulation
system. He was fascinated with the constant beat of the heart and the continual
circulation of blood, by which life in the organism is maintained. He knew that
people were able to build “many different automata or moving machines,” but he
entirely approved of the view put forward by those who understood the body “as
a machine which, having been made by the hands of God, is incomparably better
ordered and has within itself movements far more wondrous than any of those
that can be invented by men.”621 In Descartes’ eyes, the heart is thus a miraculous
device, the center of the divine machine that is the human being. 622

Poets describing anatomists and their activities, in contrast with painters, are
particularly interested in the heart – one of the most poetically privileged parts

621 Descartes, Discourse on Method, 31.
622 This mechanistic and materialistic vision of the human being was taken to its extreme
by La Mettrie in his work Machine Man (1747). Paul Hazard summed up ironically the
fate of the Leiden-trained physician and philosopher: “There was more matter in him
than in the general run of men. He was enormously fat, bloated and pot-bellied, and
a chronic glutton. On the 11 November 1758, his machine broke down. Indigestion
was the trouble.” See Hazard, European Thought in the Eighteenth Century: From
Montesquieu to Lessing (Peter Smith, 1973), 124.
of the body. A corpse is opened simply to get at the heart. Such is the case with Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz:

[…] o piękne ciała tonące: i te zwłoki białe,
Nagie zwłoki, na kamiennej posadzce, obmywane
Przez wiatr znad rzeki, włosy złepione krwią: i płacz i czemuś
To się w lotne pióra nie przyodział: i lancet przecina
Skórę, i sięga serca: […]

[...] oh, beautiful drowning bodies: and these white corpses,
Naked corpses, on a stone floor, washed
By the wind along the river, hair matted with blood: and weep, and why
Did you not dress yourself with floating feathers: the lancet cuts
Through the skin, and reaches the heart: [...].

In the work of Konstantin Biebl, a representative of modernist Czech poetry, we find a poem entitled “Postmortem,” in which the heart is the protagonist. Pulling organs into the light of day, previously hidden from view, becomes an act of disillusionment, exposing the deceptive games of appearances. The poet seems to ask: what is the human being really? What becomes of it? Or, to put it another way: what is it truly made of? The heart has a particular occupation – as an icon of humanity. Removed from the body and weighed in the hand, it no longer means anything. It disappears:

Bierzesz je nagle do ręki
i jest jakby pusta
Gdzie te góry boleści?
Już nie myśl o nich
wszystko to się pomieści
w ludzkiej dłoni

You take it in your hand suddenly
and it is kind of empty
Where are these mountains of grief?
Do not think about them anymore
all of that will fit
in the human hand

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Postmortem Dissection

prosectorial activities, which has been used by several generations of students and updated many times since 1937, leads the hand of a young pathologists by helping them find particular organs in the body. On the other hand, it seems to cover them, page after page, with aggressive and expanding terminology. Of course, I am bypassing the merits-related legitimacy and conceptual functions of such a discourse, because my focus here is the paradoxical absence, in the dissection, of a description of the heart, which ceases to exist as an integral organ; it falls apart into an incomprehensible multitude of parts, surfaces, and elements. Activities aimed at dissecting the heart have a kind dramaturgy – after all, each cut of the scalpel moves closer to finale. But their descriptions are extremely nominalized. Such terms are dominant: “the interior surface of the heart” (faciem interior cordis), “coronary groove” (sulcus coronarius), “right ventricle” (ventriculus cordis dexter), “left ventricle” (ventriculus cordis sinister), “interventricular septum” (septum interventricularis) etc., etc. For the initiated, the very succession of these names has a narrative character. One can read these prosectorial indicators like a travel report. We walked along a difficult path, made our way over great heights and through great depths, and in the end we reached our destination. But in the meantime, our destination – the heart – remained elusive, though we familiarized ourselves with its internal workings. The heart falls apart into a thousand pieces like the glass heart in Snow White.

The heart appears very differently in the dissection protocol included in a treatise by Dr Józef Stein under the title “Anatomia patologiczna choroby głodowej,” which along with other studies written by doctors in the Warsaw Ghetto was included in the one-of-a-kind book: Choroba głodowa. Badania kliniczne nad głodem wykonane w getcie warszawskim z roku 1942 (Starvation Disease: Clinical Research on Famine Performed in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942). As the title suggests, this book was the product of research conducted in the Warsaw Ghetto on the effects of extreme hunger. At the end of 1941 a team of researchers emerged under the direction of Dr Izrael Milejkowski, head of the Health Department of the Rada Żydowska. Separate rooms dedicated to those suffering from starvation were organized in hospitals, and workshops were equipped with laboratory instruments purchased using funds collected for this purpose. Research began in February 1942. The analyses, measurements, dissections and results of this research were discussed at scientific meetings. Members of the research team were eventually deported from the ghetto and murdered. In a note written in January 1943, we read:
We have begun preparing the typescript of the discussed works. We did not know if we would see them printed. But in any case, we wanted to leave behind a sample of our efforts - non omnis moriar.625

Józef Stein, who was also director of the Zakład Anatomii Patologicznej Żydowskiego Szpitala na Czystem (Department of Anatomic Pathology of the Jewish Hospital in Czyste), included in his contribution to Choroba głodowa six dissection protocols illustrating six concrete examples of death through starvation. One of them involves the case of a sixteen-year-old girl, whose dissection was performed eighteen hours after her death:

Growth below average. Nutrition, very poor, build fragile, normal. Hair - brown. Skin - sheer, dark, not very elastic, peeling off at the stomach and breasts. The brain weighs 1300 gm., very soft, swollen. [...] In the abdominal cavity about 2 liters of transparent yellowish fluid. [...] Heart - smaller than the deceased's fist, weight 150 gm.626

The unprofessional reader – who is not familiar with the rules of the poetry of dissection protocols and the peculiar wording used in them – is no doubt struck by the fragment: “Heart – smaller than the deceased’s fist.” This sounds like a quote from a poem, with its semantic dynamics, roused both by the situational and stylistic context and by the construction of the expression itself. The appearance and condition of the dead girl’s heart muscle is defined through a comparison with a blurred indicator, a comparison that remains on the borders of the dead girl’s corporeality, but in a sense also steps over those borders. It seems that the dry description of internal organs is suddenly illuminated by a discourse of a different order – a discourse that humanizes the corpse opened on the dissection table. We imagine a young, emaciated girl with dark hair. Her frail body, dark hair, tiny hands balled into fists. The “deceased’s fist” is a metaphor for the heart, thanks to which the heart, in this anatomical description, survives.

And yet one cannot help but regard this interpretative trope as somehow off the mark, given that the comparison of the heart with a fist is a standard expression, commonly used in anatomic pathology. From the six cases cited by Stein, the size of the heart is defined four times through a comparison with the dead person’s fist. In this context (the horror of the ghetto and death by hunger), it would seem to be nothing unusual; it turns out to be a linguistic cliché. From the perspective of anatomic pathology, the heart is a muscle subjected to an

625 Choroba głodowa. Badania kliniczne nad głodem wykonane w getcie warszawskim z roku 1942 (Warszawa 1946), 18.
626 Ibid., 48-49.
unstoppable element of analysis which is performed both with a lancet and the anatomist’s pen.

The epilogue to my reflections on the postmortem involves the times from which Dr Józef Stein’s dissection protocols originate. The Third Reich harnessed anatomic pathology, which had long been used to learn the secrets of life, in the service of Nazi medicine and racist anthropology.

Under Hitler’s regime, Professor August Hirt, director of the Anatomy Institute at the Reich University in Strasbourg, decided to create a collection of “Jewish-Bolshevik” skulls which, according to Hirt, would be of enormous scientific and didactic value. Hirt wrote:

There is a rich collection of sculls of almost every race and people. But science has at its disposal such a small number of Jewish sculls that research into them has produced no certain results. The war in the East has provided us with a way of correcting this problem. Securing the skulls of the Jewish-Bolshevik commissars, in which the disgusting but characteristic of the Untermensch is embodied, would provide us with the opportunity to obtain compelling scientific evidence.627

A specially chosen staff member, Hirt continued, would choose from Jews captured “in the East,” make some anthropological measurements, take a series of photographs, record all of the data, and then:

[…] after causing sudden death […] separate the head from the trunk. Having been soaked in a specially-designed and tightly closed tin container with a preservation fluid, the head will be sent to a given address.628

Hirt’s project was of great personal interest to Himmler himself, who in the spring of 1942 offered the professor all possible support and resources. It was decided, in agreement with Eichmann, that the material for the collection would be sent to Strasbourg from Auschwitz. Seventy-nine Jewish men, twenty Jewish women, two Poles and four Asians were selected and transported to the Natzweiler concentration camp near Strasbourg, where they were murdered in a gas chamber. The corpses were transported to Professor Hirt’s Anatomy Institute, where they were placed in special tanks filled with an alcohol solution. But the project was never completed. With the Allied offensive in the autumn of 1944, Hirt fled the city, having ordered the corpses to be destroyed. Institute employees managed to cut up and burn only some of the bodies; the rest fell into the hands of the

627 See J. Mikulski, Medycyna hitlerowska w służbie III Rzeszy (Warszawa 1981), 86. All information about Hirt’s collection is derived from this source.

628 Ibid., 87.
Encounters with a Corpse

Americans (who took Strasbour on 22–23 November 1944). The Strasbourg Professor had combined a passion for science with the flair of a collector. Not only had he encouraged the killing of human beings in order to turn them into anatomical exhibits, but he also collected the gold teeth that had been extracted from the corpses’ mouths. The professor’s ultimate fate is not known; no doubt, he lived somewhere to a ripe old age.

SS-Obersturmführer Johann Paul Kremer – a doctor of philosophy and medicine who habilitated in anatomy at the University of Münster, a camp physician at Auschwitz from 30 August to 18 November 1942 – was a specialist in heredity. He was also interested in changes in the human organism caused by starvation; he was able to pursue this interest fully during his time at the camp, where he was told that, for his research, he would be able to select “completely fresh material for my research from those prisoners who were killed by phenol injections.”629 Kremer observed extremely emaciated prisoners; he chose those whom he regarded as suitable experimental material, and – as he himself stated – he “reserved” them for his work. Each chosen individual was sent to a special room in block 28 and:

[…] was put upon the dissecting table while he was still alive. I [Kremer] then approached the table and put several questions to the man as to such details which pertained to my research. […] When I had collected my information the orderly approached the patient and killed him with an injection in the vicinity of the heart.630

In the journal he had systematically maintained since 1899, Kremer noted his activities as an anatomic pathologist at Auschwitz four times.

Today I preserved fresh material from the human liver, spleen and pancreas (3 October 1942); fresh material from liver, spleen and pancreas taken and preserved (10 October 1942); have taken fresh liver, spleen and pancreas material (17 October 1942); Living-fresh material (liver, spleen and pancreas) from a Jewish prisoner of 18, extremely atrophic, who had been photographed before (13 November 1942).631

629 Kremer made these statements during an interrogation on 30 July 1947 in Kraków. Rudolf Höss, Pery Broad, Johann Paul Kremer, KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS (Interpress Publishers, 1972), 167 (footnote 71). In the 1947 Kraków trial of Auschwitz perpetrators, Kremer was sentenced to death by the Supreme National Tribunal, a sentence that was reduced to life in prison. In 1958 he was freed, in 1960 he was tried in Münster and sentenced to 10 years. The German court credited him with the years already spent in prison and released him. He died in 1965 in Cologne.

630 Ibid.
631 Ibid., 167-169.
SS-Hauptsturmführer Dr Josef Mengele studied medicine and philosophy at Munich University, where in 1935 he defended his dissertation based on the racial-morphological study of the mandible of four racial groups. In 1938 he completed his medical degree at Goethe University Frankfurt. He worked at the Institute for Hereditary Biology and Racial Hygiene of the Third Reich in Frankfurt, where his focus was on twinning, the physiology and pathology of dwarfism, genetic defects and other deformations. He was sent to Auschwitz in May 1943 directly from the Eastern Front, where he had been injured. He arrived at the camp with two Iron Crosses and ambitious research plans. Mengele carried out the first phase of his experiments personally, on living twin children. For the second phase he needed someone who could expertly perform dissections (the twins had to be put to death in order to obtain the anatomical specimens necessary for continued research), which determined the fate of Dr Miklós Nyiszli, a Jew educated at German universities in Kiel and Breslau, where in 1930 he earned his doctorate in medicine. He had performed autopsies for many years as a forensic examiner. In May 1944, he was deported along with his family from Hungary to KL Auschwitz. On the selection ramp, he heard a call go out for doctors who had completed studies in Germany, who knew how to perform postmortems, and who were well-versed in forensic medicine. Nyiszli stepped forward and immediately became Dr Mengele's assistant.

From the gloomy space of Crematorium I in Birkenau one stepped into the bright dissection room with modern equipment. A gray marble tabletop attached to a cement plinth was in the center, with drainage channels leading concentrically downward. Water tanks, three porcelain basins, nets on the windows to protect against flies and mosquitoes. The walls were painted light green. Next to that, Dr Mengele’s office: a comfortable chair, a microscope on a long table, a glass case with chemicals, and – above all – a large book shelf containing expert literature: books, books and more books. “In short,” Nyiszli wrote, “the exact replica of any large city’s institute of pathology.”

We might add that such images do not depart too far from the classic representations of the theatrum anatomicum: dissection table in the center, accessories in service to the postmortem, books. On the other end of the building Nyiszli had his own room; he thus worked and lived on the site of the crematorium. By the time the camp was evacuated in January 1945, he had carried out a large number of dissections. In his memoirs on the camp (published in Hungarian in 1946), Nyiszli emphasized that:

The confines of the KZ offered vast possibilities for research, first in the field of forensic medicine [...]. The abundance – unequaled elsewhere in the world – of corpses, and the fact that one could dispose of them freely for purposes of research, opened up even wider horizons. I knew from experience that, whereas the clinics in most major cities of the world managed to furnish their institutes of forensic medicine with from 100 to 150 bodies for purposes of research, the Auschwitz KZ was capable of furnishing literally millions.633

We should point out the way in which Nyiszli talks about the postmortem performed on a certain pair of twins. These were children under ten years old who had been transferred from the so-called gypsy camp. The dry medical discourse that we saw in the dissection protocols of the Choroba głodowa is suddenly interrupted. Emotion breaks through the dispassionate report of a dissection professional. The voice of the pathologist cracks and someone entirely different begins to talk to us – a prisoner in KL Auschwitz-Birkenau with the number A 8450 tattooed on his left arm:

Together with the cerebellum I extracted the brain and examined them. Then followed the opening of the thorax and the removal of the sternum. Next I separated the tongue by means of an incision made beneath the chin. With the tongue came the esophagus, with the respiratory tracts came both lungs. I washed the organs in order to examine them more thoroughly. The tiniest spot or the slightest difference in color could furnish valuable information. I made a transverse incision across the pericardium and removed the fluid. Next I took out the heart and washed it. I turned it over and over in my hand to examine it. In the exterior coat of the left ventricle was a small pale red spot caused by a hypodermic injection, which scarcely differed from the color of the tissue around it. There could be no mistake. The injection had been given with a very small needle. Without a doubt a hypodermic needle. For what purpose had he received the injection? Injections into the heart can be administered in extremely serious cases, when the heart begins to fail. I would soon know. I opened the heart, starting with the ventricle. Normally the blood contained in the left ventricle is taken out and weighed. This method could not be employed in the present case, because the blood was coagulated into a compact mass. I extracted the coagulum with the forceps and brought it to my nose. I was struck by the characteristic odor of chloroform. The victim had received an injection of chloroform in the heart, so that the blood of the ventricle, in coagulating, would deposit on the valves and caused instantaneous death by heart failure. My discovery of the most monstrous secret of the Third Reich's medical science made my knees tremble. Not only did they kill with gas, but also with injections of chloroform into the heart. A cold sweat broke out on my forehead. Luckily I was alone. If others had been present it would have been difficult for me to conceal my excitement. I finished the dissection [...].634

633 Ibid., 33.
634 Ibid., 37-38.
Nyiszli mentioned nothing about his discovery in his protocol. He did not fill in the part involving the cause of death. He explained:

I was not timorous by nature and my nerves were good. [...] but now a shudder of fear ran through me. If Dr Mengele had any idea that I had discovered the secret of his injections he would send ten doctors, in the name of the political SS, to attest to my death.635

On territories ruled by the Third Reich, the art of the autopsy could be developed in a way that was not burdened by previous restrictions. There was no shortage of bodies, and though they originated from the same category as always – “criminals” – that category grew to unprecedented proportions. Every representative of the “lower” races belonged there, above all Jews, Gypsies, and Slavs, but also all of the Reich’s enemies, above all “Jewish Bolsheviks.” Dr Johann Paul Kremer did not have to worry about “dissection material” for his research. And doctors in the Warsaw Ghetto were aware that they found themselves in a peculiar situation. As Dr Józef Stein wrote:

The abundance of human material from the 1939-1943 war years within the Warsaw ghetto, where chronic hunger was at the forefront of all matters tied to society and disease, was exceptionally suited to such research. [...] Dissection material was extremely abundant.636

The head of the Warsaw team, Dr Milejkowski, explained how work had been stopped as a result of the Grossaktion and the fact that 300,000 Jews had been sent to Treblinka; in his introduction to Choroba głodowa, he wrote:

[...] work on starvation stopped: the hospitals and laboratories were destroyed, as was – most importantly – the raw material of our expert medical research, namely the human material.637

One thing that is shocking but also entirely understandable is the fact that perpetrators and victims spoke about their research in the same way: they were connected by their professional medical language (or rather jargon), with a special role played by the terms “human material” and “dissection material.”

During the Nazis’ twelve-year rule in Germany, dissections were performed by well trained and highly educated professionals, prominent clinicians with academic titles working at renowned research institutes, one of the most important of which – in this story – was the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology.

635 Ibid., 38.
636 Choroba głodowa, 22.
637 Ibid., 9.
Human Heredity, and Eugenics in Berlin-Dahlem. As the head physician at Auschwitz, Dr Mengele cooperated with this institute; anatomical specimens from his laboratory at Crematorium I at Birkenau, including children’s heads and prisoners’ eyes, including those of children, were sent to the institute in Dahlem. Eyes, especially the matter of the inherited color of eyes, were of particular interest to Dr Karin Magnussen, an anthropologist at the institute and a member of the Nazi Office of Racial Policy.638

The expert nature of autopsies did not change, but their goals did. For centuries, the final conceptual horizon of research in anatomic pathology had been the discovery of the secrets behind the human being and life itself. For the Nazis, however, it was about confirming their ideological phantasms about race and racial hierarchy. It was about attaining the tools that would allow them to manipulate the human species. The goal of Nazi anthropologists was a kind of correction of nature. They had created a set of theories based on the policy of Blut und Boden (blood and soil), whose aim was to create a perfect race of people and to have those people settle in the so-called Altreich. Anthropologists were to “create a state in which the German gene pool became homogeneous and the racial and genetic qualities of the citizens matched their national identity as Germans.”639 This goal could be achieved by two means: sterilization and extermination. The research on twins conducted by Dr Mengele was at the center of this great project to correct (not discover) the human being. Dr Eugen Fischer, a specialist at the Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics, claimed that research on twins was necessary to promote “positive racial hygiene,” and that the results of such research would make it possible to “influence the biological basis of culture.”640

It is worth pointing out a change in the hierarchy of internal organs that appeared in the field of anatomical activity. While for Kremer, a dissection was performed in order to prepare the liver, spleen and pancreas, for Dr Mengele it was for the eyes. Mengele’s assistants packed up various “specimens” acquired through dissections, including eye balls extracted from corpses which were then placed in special glass containers, and they sent them to Berlin. Anatomical

639 Ibid., 152.
640 Ibid., 156.
specimens would then become the object of further research, but they were already treated in part as trophies. Along with his “specimens in 96 % alcohol,” Kremer meticulously packed bottles of vodka, razor blades, soap and shaving cream, thermometers, nail clippers, perfumes, needles, tooth powder, and darning wool, and he sent it all to his friends.641

And what happened to the heart? It is difficult to avoid the impression that it lost its privileged position; the heart was a matter usually taken care of by an orderly, who injected the appropriate dose of phenol into one of its chambers during routine treatment. The heart, the miraculous mechanism that so delighted Descartes, was turned into a mere container for poison.

**Between the Grotesque and the Sublime**

**In the Arms of Eudoxie’s Corpse**

It is not only the case that the First World War devastated the world order in a political and moral sense. Mass killing on an unprecedented scale, the use of a modernized arsenal of weapons (including poisonous gases), the senseless death of hundreds of thousands of soldiers trapped in a position war, the horrible conditions in the trenches, the direct contact between the living and the dead – all of this transformed war into “slaughter” and “butchery,”642 but also into a modern *danse macabre*. The war inspired the iconography of a new “death dance,” as Michel Vovelle has claimed.

These militarized *danse macabres*:

[...] even if they assume old forms, reveal the new face of brutality – a magma of corpses and mud from the trenches, the hell of artillery fire, the furious storms of bayonets, and often a new level of annihilation – poisonous gases, inconceivable and undeniable evidence that we have perfected death and stepped over a certain threshold.643

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641 The package weighed 14 Kg. See entry in Kremer’s journal dated 17 November 1942. Höss et al., *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS*, 169.


The particular experience of the trenches abounded in macabre encounters with corpses. Historians and cultural anthropologists highlight this phenomenon of the “trench experience.”

From among the many sources illustrating the horror and terror (though also the trivialization) of such encounters, I have chosen an example that has a clearly different stylistic intonation. In this text, the reader will sense a certain dissonance, impropriety, an imbalance between the macabre subject matter and the way it is captured, the image’s unsettling deformation, the unreconciled comic effect in collision with the broader atrocity. The result is a breakdown in the formulaic ways of perceiving macabre situations, the creation of some distance between us and those commonplace views, and as a consequence the possibility that horror can be appeased, disarmed. The source under discussion here thus has, I would say, the character of the grotesque.

I want to focus on a fragment of Henri Barbusse’s *Under Fire: The Story of a Squad*. Eudoxie Dumail is a beautiful country girl who wanders here and there around the front. The fat and ugly private Lamuse is crazy about her. “I want her; but, you know, I shall marry her all right,” Lamuse confided to his friend. “Ah, my boy, there are times when I’ve just got to hold myself back with a hook […]. She’s so beautiful.” One evening Lamuse meets Eudoxie, “in the sunshine, this woman crowned with gold,” alluring and intoxicating with “the moon-like purity of her skin […] her teeth, too, glisten white in the living wound of her half-open mouth, red as her heart.” The soldier tries to touch the girl, but she pulls back and cries: “Leave me alone – you disgust me!” Such is the exposition of an unfulfilled war romance, loaded with conflicting emotions, desires, and contempt. This love story comes to an unexpected end in a scene built on the principle of reversal: what is beautiful becomes disgusting, what arouses, causes disgust, and the dreamed-of hug turns into a horrifying kiss of death. Here is a fragment that might well be entitled “In the Arms of Eudoxie’s Corpse”:

“I have seen Eudoxie again,” He gasps for breath, his chest wheezes, and with his eyeballs fast fixed upon a nightmare, he says, “She was putrid.”

“It was the place we’d lost,” Lamuse went on, “and that the Colonials took again with the bayonet ten days ago.

“First we made a hole for the sap, and I was in at it, since I was scooping more than the others I found myself in front. The others were widening and making solid behind. But

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behold I find a jumble of beams. I'd lit on an old trench, caved in, ‘vidently; half caved in – there was some space and room. In the middle of those stumps of wood all mixed together that I was lifting away one by one from in front of me, there was something like a big sandbag in height, upright, and something on the top of it hanging down.

“And behold a plank gives way, and the queer sack falls on me, with its weight on top. I was pegged down, and the smell of a corpse filled my throat – on the top of the bundle there was a head, and it was the hair that I'd seen hanging down.

“You understand, one couldn't see very well; but I recognized the hair ’cause there isn't any other like it in the world, and then the rest of the face, all stov in and moldy, the neck pulped, and all the lot dead for a month perhaps. It was Eudoxie, I tell you.

“Yes, it was the woman I could never go near before, you know – that I only saw a long way off and couldn't ever touch, same as diamonds. She used to run about everywhere, you know. She used even to wander in the lines. One day she must have stopped a bullet, and stayed there, dead and lost, until the chance of this sap.

“You clinch the position? I was forced to hold her up with one arm as well as I could, and work with the other. She was trying to fall on me with all her weight. Old man, she wanted to kiss me, and I didn't want – it was terrible. She seemed to be saying to me: ‘You want to kiss me, well then, come, come now!’ She had on her – she had there, fastened on, the remains of a bunch of flowers, and they was rotten, too, and the posy stank in my nose like the corpse of some little beast.

“I had to take her in my arms, in both of them, and turn gently around so that I could put her down on the other side. The place was so narrow and pinched that as we turned, for a moment, I hugged her to my breast and couldn't help it. With all my strength, old chap, as I should have hugged her once on a time if she'd have let me.

“I've seen half an hour cleaning myself from the touch of her and the smell that she breathed on me in spite of me and in spite of herself. Ah, lucky for me that I'm as done up as a wretched cart-horse.”

He turns over on his belly, clenches his fists, and slumbers, with his face buried in the ground and his dubious dream of passion and corruption.646

Barbusse presented war as a nightmare that exceeds the limits of human endurance: soldiers torn about by bullets and artillery shells, trenches and battlefields flowing with decaying bodies, congealed horror and cruelty. Under Fire is one of the classic depictions of this kind, full of bestial and monstrous behavior, highlighting – as Maria Janion wrote – the “frenetic effect of estrangement.”647 The macabre nature of war collides with the situation’s clearly comical nature. At the same time, it seems that horror and comedy coexist, though after the work has been read, the impression remains that the comical element is dominant.648

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646 Ibid., 128-129.
648 Something new that the romantic theory of art brought to the history of the grotesque is the principle of the inseparable connection between beauty and ugliness, horror and
The short scene cited above is one element of a greater whole; it is the finale to a certain plot thread. It had started within the convention of a harsh but passionate war romance. The long passage serves as a kind of punch line to this romance, and the effect of surprise, or even shock, is achieved thanks to a reversal in expectations, conventions, and tradition.

Though the reader is already used to books filled with images of brutality, in this case the author saturates his macabre scene with eroticism tied to baroque concepts of the “beautiful, alluring death.” But this is a macabre eroticism à rebours that does not exude an ambiguous, dark beauty, an ecstatic union of love and death. It is trivial, disgusting, ridiculous. The necrophilic romance of the eighteenth-century tradition is turned on its head, parodied. Eudoxie is not the “beautiful dead woman” with a sensual and captivating charm, but rather a stinking carcass. The living lover does not want to be close to his dead beauty, he does not want to satisfy his perverse lust at her side. On the contrary – at all costs, he wants to free himself from her abominable embrace.

The passage I have entitled “In the Arms of Eudoxie’s Corpse” is an example of yet another reversal. Barbusse performs a parodic inversion of the old topos of “death and the maiden.”

This topos has its roots in Greek mythology (Hades abducted Persephone to his underworld kingdom), and it stems directly from the tradition of the danse macabre, though it modifies that tradition in a significant way. From the beginning, the dance of death contained an element of the erotic; death appeared alongside a young woman or a beautiful virgin. In German Renaissance art, this element underwent a particular intensification. The motif of the dance with death transformed itself into the separate subject of “death and the maiden,” and along with that, there emerged the dark but exciting connection of sex with death, Eros and Thanatos. The characters in these representations no longer

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649 On seventeenth- and eighteenth-century representations of the topos of Eros and Thanatos, and on necrophilia in the eighteenth century, see P. Ariès, op. cit., 361-372.
participate in a dance, but rather in an amorous convergence. In the Swiss painter Niklaus Manuel Deutsch’s (1485–1530) Death as a Soldier Hugs a Girl (see VII), death takes on the character of a transi – a decaying corpse – lasciviously embracing a young woman, pulling her closer, lifting her dress, pushing his hand between her legs and into her groin. On a fresco in a church in Bern, the same painter represented death as a skeleton embracing a woman from behind which, with bony hands, is making his way toward her breasts. The German painter and printmaker Hans Baldung (1484–1545) (see VI), one of Albrecht Dürer’s students, painted a series of works in the cycle “death and the maiden.” We see, for example, death as a corpse passionately kissing the lips of a horrified woman. Her falling gown reveals her naked white body, and it is precisely this female nakedness that is at the forefront of Baldung’s paintings in this cycle. But in his most famous work, entitled The Knight, the Young Girl, and Death, the girl is clothed. She is the object of a struggle between the knight, who is trying to keep the girl mounted on his galloping horse, and death, who is trying to pull her by the dress to the ground.

Franz Schubert (1797–1828) took up this classic subject in his music twice: in a song composed in 1817 entitled “Der Tod und das Mädchen,” whose text is based on a poem by Matthias Claudius, and which Schubert included in his famous violin quartet from the year 1824. The song takes the form of a dialogue between a girl, who begs an approaching skeleton to go away and not touch her, and death, who promises the girl soft sleep in his arms. We find an unusual return to this motif of “death and the maiden” in a work by Edvard Munch (1863–1944), a painter of death and final matters who, since childhood, had lived in the shadow of sickness and dying. In a drawing from the year 1894 (see VIII) and a previous oil painting, we see a skeleton in an amorous embrace with a naked girl. Death is neither aggressive nor insolently lascivious, as in the paintings by Deutsch and Baldung. Here, the loving devotion is mutual; the girl is not ensnared by death, but rather succumbs to death’s caresses. He hugs her around her bare waist and thrusts his bony leg between her knees. Here, love conquers death. In his Kiss of Death (1899), a girl has her hair entwined around the neck and shoulders of a skeleton, whose skull is delicately touching her cheek. Egon Schiele’s canvas Death and the Maiden (1915) presents a couple embracing. On a white sheet covering stones that resemble the blurred features of human faces, a young woman in a patterned dress is kneeling and hugging death imagined as an old man in a coat. He is pressing the woman’s head to his chest. This image represents a departure from the traditional motif; devoid of eroticism, it emanates melancholy tinged with a vague feeling of anxiety and the pain of separation.
There remains only a distant echo of the twisted motif of “death and a maiden” in Barbusse and of that moralizing element which was always present in similar performances: life is short, a woman’s beauty is fragile and passes quickly. But this moral seems muddied by the language through which Eudoxie’s story is told. Colloquialisms, diminutives, and brutalism all serve to establish a distance between us and the monstrosity of the larger situation.

Barbusse’s reversal of this topos creates an effect of grotesque degradation. It is not death, imagined traditionally as a skeleton or the decaying corpse of a man, who makes an advance on the beautiful girl, pawing at her, ensnaring her. It is exactly the opposite: the decaying corpse of a once beautiful – but now monstrous – woman advances toward the horrified soldier. And what we have here is a gender exchange and a role exchange. Lamuse’s erotic dream comes true in a macabre scene of necrophilic contact that, in fact, does not happen. The thanatotic erotic is negated, stripped of the dark but fascinating aura of “unhealthy” lust. What remains is only the “dubious dream of passion and corruption.” The realism of the front comes to the fore: an old trench and months of corpses, stench and disgust, because the essential “reversal” of convention has to do with the fact that the story – according to the documentary, autobiographical nature of this “story of a squad” – really happened, and that the reader is prepared for such a factual-graphic story. The dance with death is reality, and not just a representation; stinking corpses and living humans are entwined with one another in a literal sense, not just in images.

How, then, can we present the experience of the macabre of war, in order to capture its terrifying strangeness? According to Wolfgang Kayser, “the grotesque world is – and is not – our world,” in which the human being has lost his bearings, where certainty turns out to be a guise. According to Lee Byron Jennings, the simultaneous excitement of horror and laughter is the manifestation of a “disarming mechanism” that serves as a source for the grotesque imagination, whose deepest intention is to tame demonic fear.650

Barbusse himself conceived the appearance of his friend’s corpse in precisely these categories:

Death has bestowed a grotesque look and attitude on the man who was so comely and so tranquil. With his hair scattered over his eyes, his mustache trailing in his mouth, and his face swollen - he is laughing. One eye is widely open, the other shut, and the tongue

lolls out. His arms are outstretched in the form of a cross: the hands open, the fingers separated. The right leg is straight. The left, whence flowed the hemorrhage that made him die, has been broken by a shell; it is twisted into a circle, dislocated, slack, invertebrate. A mournful irony has invested the last writhe of his agony with the appearance of a clown’s antic.

It is not the place here to cite and analyze the wide range of examples of the grotesque that serve as a means of expressing the macabre experience. We encounter them in the literature of the First World War, in memoirs, journals and letters from the front. And we encounter them in Holocaust testimonies.

The Earth Discloses Its Corpses

Genocide in the twentieth century devoured tens of millions of victims. An unimaginable mass of human bodies: starved, tormented, battered, executed, gassed, and burned. As Paul Celan wrote in his poem “Todesfuge,” victims of the Holocaust have their graves “in the clouds where it’s roomy to lie.” And what about the rest? Where are their corpses? Where are their graves? Mass crimes leave behind mass graves – pits of death dug often by the victims themselves just before their execution – and they leave behind old trenches, forts, excavations, quarries adapted to this purpose. Corpses are thrown into these pits, corpses that must be precisely and expertly arranged in order to pack in the greatest number. The pits are then filled up, and maybe a woods will grow over them. The corpses are to be covered by earth, and graves are to disappear in lush greenery. The buried cannot leave behind a single trace.

But the earth has ways of disclosing these corpses, and this real situation serves as a source for one of the fundamental metaphors describing the experience of the twentieth-century macabre. One can distinguish two variants of this “disclosure.” First – when it is people who seek, find, and dig up a collective grave. And second – when it is earth itself that discloses its corpse-filled interior.

The history of mass graves and their disclosure is marked out by innocent-sounding place-names which, only after their macabre contents have been discovered, take on an ominous feel: Katyn, Babi Yar, Kurapaty, Srebrenica.
Meticulously, layer by layer, the bodies are removed: stuck together with putrid dampness, or dried up and shriveled, or turned into skeletons covered in scraps of clothing. Personal articles found next to the corpses are collected. And then the arduous process of identifying the victims begins. Prosecutors, historians, and family members (if they are still alive) wait for the results. Secrets buried by the perpetrators are extracted from the earth’s interior. That which was meant to fall into oblivion, into the abyss, and to disappear forever, is now discovered. The moral passion behind the search for evidence of crimes, transformed into a collective effort by groups of people acting in the name of international investigative institutions, makes it impossible for anything to remain hidden. The executioners tried to cover their tracks, the earth discloses its corpses, and their bones begin to talk.654

I will take a closer look at the second variant. The example I will use is drawn from the prose of Varlam Shalamov. I call this passage “The Earth of Kolyma Discloses its Corpses”:

The logging area was just ahead, the slope of the mountain had been laid bare, and the shallow snow had been blown away by the wind. The stumps had all been rooted out; a charge of ammonal was placed under the larger ones, and the stump would fly into the air. Smaller stumps were uprooted with long bars. The smallest were simply pulled out by hand like the shrubs of dwarf cedar.

The mountain had been laid bare and transformed into a gigantic stage for a camp mystery play.

A grave, a mass prisoner grave, a stone pit stuffed full with undecaying corpses of 1938 was sliding down the side of the hill, revealing the secret of Kolyma.

In Kolyma, bodies are not given over to earth, but to stone. Stone keeps and reveals them. The permafrost keeps and reveals secrets. All of our loved ones who died in Kolyma, all those who were shot, beaten to death, sucked dry by starvation, can still be recognized even after tens of years. There were no gas furnaces in Kolyma. The corpses wait in stone, in the permafrost. […]

In 1938 entire work gangs dug such graves, constantly drilling, exploding, deepening the enormous gray, hard, cold stone pits. […]

654 For a guide through contemporary mass graves, see Clea Koff, *The Bone Woman: A Forensic Anthropologist’s Search for Truth in the Mass Graves of Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo* (Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005). Koff is a forensic anthropologist and osteologist. She was part of the team sent by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda to investigate the 1994 genocide, and was part of the team in Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia and Kosovo sent by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.
These graves, enormous stone pits, were filled to the brim with corpses. The bodies had not decayed; they were just bare skeletons over which stretched dirty, scratched skin bitten all over by lice.

The north resisted with all its strength this work of man, not accepting the corpses into its bowels. Defeated, humbled, retreating, stone promised to forget nothing, to wait and preserve its secret. The severe winters, the hot summers, the winds, the six years of rain had not wrenched the dead men from the stone. The earth opened, baring its subterranean storerooms, for they contained not only gold and lead, tungsten and uranium, but also undecaying human bodies.

These human bodies slid down the slope, perhaps attempting to arise. From a distance, from the other side of the creek, I had previously seen these moving objects that caught up against branches and stones; I had seen them through the few trees still left standing and I thought that they were logs that had not yet been hauled away.

Now the mountain was laid bare, and its secret was revealed. The grave ‘opened’, and the dead men slid down the stony slope.655

This entire scene contains within itself a certain majestic beauty, and in describing it one could no doubt make use of the category of grandeur, the sublime. Here, feelings and values reach a summit. The victims’ pain and suffering, in an eternal deep freeze, do not vanish, but rather persist, sublimated and monumentalized. The corpses of the exterminated Gulag prisoners survived in the “white crematoria” of Kolyma and, once freed from their rocky grave, they testify to crimes committed. Which is why these corpses, having been brought to the surface, are surrounded not so much by a threat of the macabre as by an aura of the mystery of resurrection. The imagery is not so much terrifying as it is pathetic; it brings a kind of metaphysical consolation.

A key role in this imagery is played by nature. Nature is active; it reveals its terrible internal deposit and thus serves as the perpetrator in a certain act of justice. But nature faces resistance. The forces of nature are endowed with conflicting vectors, as if a struggle of sorts has taken place between supporters of evil (who work to cover the tracks of crimes) and the allies of good, who help to expose the truth, to disclose hidden bodies. Permafrost, the arctic winter freeze, serves as a protective cover, concealing mysteries. The summer sun, wind and rain scrape that cover away. One might say that they push aside the tombstone. The resurrection metaphor is absolutely appropriate here; in any case, Shalamov himself uses it. The earth breaks up and slides away; the rock is “defeated, humbled, retreating.” The dead come out of their graves, human bodies slide “down the slope, perhaps attempting to arise.”

Here, the topos of nature as a force that is indifferent to human suffering, the juxtaposition of beautiful nature and monstrous crimes, a topos that is repeated over and over again in accounts describing both wars and pogroms, in testimonies written by victims of both communism and Nazism, is placed in doubt. In his poem “In the City of Slaughter,” which is based on events of the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 and serves as the poetic prototype of the pogrom discourse, Hayim Nahman Bialik makes use of a characteristic parallel: “The slayer slew, the blossom burst, and it was sunny weather!”  

Forty years later, Itzhak Katzenelson cursed the heavens, which were deaf to the tragedies of Jews being deported to Treblinka from the Warsaw ghetto, and he accuses the sun of being complicit in the crime:

Wyście patrzyły tu z wysokości, a blask wasz dalej promieniał!
Wasz tani błękit się nie zachmurzył i błyszczał zły i nieszczery,
Słońce w czerwieni, jak kat okrutne, w wiecznej toczyło się ciszy.  

You were watching from above, with your continued radiance!
Your cheap azure was not clouded over and shined evil and insincere,
The sun in its redness, like a cruel executioner, moved on in eternal silence.

In poetic homage to the Gulag’s “dokhodyagi” (those who were reaching the very end of their lives), Varlam Shalamov wrote: “I raise my glass to a road in the forest / To those who fall on their way / To those who can’t drag themselves farther / But are forced to drag on.” In Shalamov’s prose cited above, nature is not indifferent to victims; on the contrary, it offers them justice, it reveals, it brings things into the light of day.

Here we have a scene that strikes at the heart of the traumatic experience of our times, which lend genocide an ideological motivation, which reshape murder into a product of state-run industrial death; times that reverse the poles of good and evil, that call truth lies, and lies truth. The spirit of history reveals the “pain of the twentieth century,” the age of the “animal,” the “adder,” in which “Everything is confused forever / And it’s not clear to me / Who is beast

657 Itzhak Katzenelson, Pieśń o zamordowanym zydowskim narodzie, trans., notes and intro. by Ficowski (Warszawa 1986), 52.
now, who is a man / And how long before the execution.”661 In the face of totalitarian lies, the annihilation of people, and the annihilation of memory, calls that we often see in victims’ testimonies for “the world to learn” about these crimes, that these crimes be “remembered,” are particularly poignant. The authors of the manuscript hidden in Birkenau’s human ash pits by members of the Sonderkommando, declared among other things: “We shall try to preserve all this for the world […] show all this to the world,” and requested:

Dear finder, search everywhere, in every inch of soil. Tens of documents are buried under it […]. Great quantities of teeth are also buried here. It was we, the Kommando workers, who expressly have strewn them all over the terrain, as many as we could, so that the world should find material traces of the millions of murdered people.662

The student Dawid Graber, as he helped bury the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto in the basement of the building at Nowolipki 68 in Warsaw, placed a testament in the metal box, in which he wrote: “May this treasure […] alarm the world that lost its way in the twentieth century. […] [May] the world learn the entire truth.”663

But the portrait painted by Shalamov fits neither into the category of the sentimental landscape, in which nature works in harmony with characters’ feelings and serves as a correlate of human emotions, nor into the category of the romantic landscape, where it is a separate, threatening, mysterious entity with a life of its own.664 Neither can one describe the earth of Kolyma, as it discloses its corpses, within the framework of the topos, deeply rooted in tradition, of the “language of nature,” or the “parlance of nature.”665 Because, after all, what language does nature speak when it is part of the territory of the gulag archipelago? What hieroglyphics, signs or symbols are we to decipher? Nature speaks to us with corpses, for Kolyma’s “subterranean storerooms […] contained not only gold and lead, tungsten and uranium,” but also a deposit of corpses. What message does this deathly script, extracted from the earth, carry? Is it legible at all? Does earth, as it discloses its corpses, speak? Or does it just babble?666

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662 Jadwiga Bezwińska, Amidst a Nightmare of Crime, 176, 76.
666 I am indebted to M. P. Markowski for suggestions regarding the reversal of the romantic topos of nature and the babble-like speech of Kolyma earth.
maybe it allows the victims’ frozen bodies to speak; maybe it allows them to give testimony that is silent and, at the same time, most meaningful.

**Contemporary Antigone**

In his *Scienza Nuova* (1723), Giambattista Vico pointed to three basic behaviors characterizing the human being:

> We observe that the barbarous and civilized nations of the world, despite their great separation in space and time and their separate foundation, all share these three human customs: all have some religion, all contract solemn marriages, and all bury their dead. And in every nation, no matter how savage and crude, no rites are celebrated with more elaborate ceremonies or more sacred solemnities than those of religion, marriage and burial. Now, according to Axiom 13, whenever uniform ideas originate among peoples unknown to each other, they must have a common ground of truth. Hence, all the nations must have grasped that these three institutions are the origin of all civilizations, and hence that they must be guarded religiously. For otherwise, the world would return to a brutish state and again become wilderness.⁶⁶⁷

One can find in Vico’s thinking a warning against violating the order on which the “human world” is based. In the context of contemporary discussions on human existence, on transhumanism and posthumanism, and on relations between human beings and non-humans, it is worth pondering one of the indicators – in Vico’s view – of humanity and civilization, namely the burying of the dead.⁶⁶⁸ Differences in how dead bodies are treated and how burials take place are indications of differences in culture and in the way the human being is conceived. For the Italian thinker, to be a human meant above all to perform burials. As he emphasized, the word *humanitas* stems from the word *humando* – burying. Thus, any departure from cultural rites regulating behavior towards the dead body and the funeral means entering into a non-human sphere, in effect savagery.

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⁶⁶⁸ For the argument that the act of burying the dead is only a human custom, see – following in Vico’s footsteps - R. P. Harrison, *The Dominion of the Death* (Chicago 2003). For pointing this work out to me, I want to thank E. Domańska, who in her review emphasized the controversy surrounding Harrison’s claim, pointing to research conducted on the behavior of elephants, who take care of the remains of the animals in their herd. See E. Domańska, “Nekrokracja,” *Konkwesty* 1-2 (2004), 105.
What is of interest to me here is textual evidence describing situations involving the desecration of the human corpse and the violation of funeral rituals, and evidence describing attempts to reestablish the order of things thus disrupted. I wonder, what is a funeral in extreme situations (war, genocide)? Why did people sometimes, in great desperation, attempt to maintain ritual even when it endangered their own life? Burial practices are often interpreted as an attempt to mitigate fears of the dead, or as an act stemming from fear of the corpse’s impurity. These explanations are well-known, which is why I skip them here. I will focus instead on the burial understood as an obligation imposed on the living and directed at those who did not survive. One cannot help but regard efforts to perform funeral rituals during the Holocaust as a final defense of humanity’s foundation.

Ancient Tradition

From Greek tragedy we have the character of Antigone. Against the king’s edict, but according to the will of the gods, Antigone attempts to bury the corpse of Polynices, who had been killed in fratricidal battle at the gates of Thebes. The duty to care for her brother’s body, out of obedience to the unwritten laws of the gods, led Antigone to break the law as represented by the monarch’s will, which embodied the idea of the state. Antigone is able to only partially carry out the funeral ritual; she symbolically covers the body with a thin layer of earth, after which she “thrice on the dead […] poured a lustral stream” consisting of wine, milk, olive oil, or honey. Such is how the chorus comments on her tragic guilt: “Your devotion and piety ring true, / But rites be paid when rites are due. / Yet is it ill to disobey / The powers who hold by might the sway.”

She, who did not agree that Polyneices ought to remain “a dishonored corpse” which “no man may bury […] or make lament,” was sent by Creon into the dungeon and condemned to a slow death. The prophet Tiresias revealed to the king that by prohibiting the burial of Polyneices and condemning Antigone to death, he was provoking the wrath of the gods and inflicting suffering on himself and the city. Creon assented, by freeing Antigone and by himself going “to

669 See, for example, L-V Thomas, Le Cadavre: De la biologie à l’anthropologie (Complexe, 1980); Antropologia śmierci. Myśl francuska, ed. and trans. S. Cichowicz and J. M. Godzimirski (Warszawa 1993); M. Vovelle, op. cit.
671 Ibid., 381.
672 Ibid., 317.
a clear place, where the naked corpse lies." A proper burial ceremony was
performed: the body was cleaned, and the remains were burned and placed in a
grave. But catastrophe could not be avoided. Antigone, Creon’s son Haemon, and
Creon’s wife Eurydice all commit suicide, and the devastated king flees the city.

The Creon of Sophocles’ tragedy, by leaving Polynieces’ body as “a feast /
For vultures to scent and swoop upon,” had a predecessor, namely Achilles. Having slain Hector at the gates of Troy, the “most valiant of Achaeans” declares
he will take terrible revenge on Priam’s dying son for the death of his beloved
Patroclus: “But Hector! [...] / Thee the dogs shall rend / Dishonorably, and the
fowls of the air, / But all Achaia’s host shall him entomb.

The desecration of Hector’s corpse is juxtaposed to the great funeral
celebrations that surrounded Patroclus’ death. The Greek hero not only denies
Hector a funeral, but he also torments the Trojan’s corpse by promising several
times that he would “give Hector dragg’d hither to be torn by dogs. Apollo calls
on the gods to end these disgraceful acts. In the end, the hero answered Priam’s
pleas, submitting himself to the law of a contrite heart; he hands Hector’ body
over to the Trojan king, having ordered it to be cleaned and richly clothed. The
Trojans would thus be able to give Hector a proper burial.

An emblematic image of the desecration of a corpse is the topos of “thrown
to be eaten,” according to which a dead person experiences the final humilia-
tion: a body, which should be cared for and protected, becomes scavengers’ prey
or is left to decay in an open field. Such was the case in The Iliad and Antigone,
and – to refer to Roman tradition – such was the case with Lucan’s Pharsalia, the

673 Translator’s note: Translations of Antigone vary wildly. The lines in question here
are lines 1108-1109 of the play. In the Polish edition cited by Professor Leociak,
they read: “Na miejsce widne, gdzie nagi trup leży,” which I have translated above
directly from the Polish because - with its clear reference to a corpse - it applies to the
Professor’s intentions. See Sofokles, Antygona, trans. K. Morawski (Wroclaw 1984),
42. The Storr translation, at lines 1108-1109, reads: “Speed away / To the mountain. I too will go.” See Sophocles, 399.
674 Ibid., 317.
675 Homer, The Iliad of Homer, trans. William Cowper (CreateSpace Independent
Publishing Platform, 2018), 479.
676 Ibid., 486. According to Curtius, Homer reprimands Achilles for mistreating Hector’s
corpse and for denying it a proper burial. See Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature
677 For more on the law of a contrite heart and Homer’s characters, see A. Krokiewicz,
Moralność Homera i etyka Hezjoda (Warszawa 1959) (for material on The Iliad, see pp. 97-117).
unfinished epic poem about the civil war between Caesar and Pompey. The Battle of Pharsalus in 48 BCE ended in Pompey’s defeat. Victorious Caesar looked out over the battlefield – “He fixes his gaze on rivers racing with blood, bodies in piles high as the tops of the highest hills” – and he denies Pompey’s fallen soldiers a burial, leaving them instead as prey for wild animals. Lucan scrupulously lists the animals that descend upon the macabre feast: wolves, lions, she-bears, dogs, vultures. He wrote: “Often, from the skies above, gouts of blood or rotten flesh rained down on the victor’s upturned face and impious standards, as birds, their weary talons strengthless, let some limbs drop.”

Biblical tradition also regards denying the dead a proper burial as a terrible misfortune. In Psalms 79:2, we come upon the topos of “thrown to be eaten”: “The dead bodies of thy servants have they given to be meat unto the fowls of the heaven, the flesh of thy saints unto the beasts of the earth.” The prophet Ahijah the Shilonite, foretelling the destruction of Jeroboam’s dynasty, prophesized (1 Kings 14:11): “Dogs will eat those belonging to Jeroboam who die in the city, and the birds will feed on those who die in the country. The Lord has spoken!”

The failure to carry out a proper funeral ceremony prevents the deceased from successfully completing the ritual of transition; it blocks the path to the land of the dead. Unburied, they wander along the fringes, with no chance of getting to the other side, without hope of peace. Patroclus, appearing to Achilles in a dream, begs him to hold his funeral, complaining that – unburied – he cannot enter the land of the dead. Which is why Hector pleaded with Achilles: “By thy own life […] / Send home my body, grant me burial rites / Among the daughters and the sons of Troy.”

And which is why, in an encounter with Odysseus in Hades, the spirit of Elpenor begs: “[…] please my lord, remember me. / Do not go on and leave me here unburied, / abandoned, without tears and lamentation.” We see the

679 Ibid., 194.
680 As yet another example of this topos, one can refer to what is perhaps Shakespeare’s most bloody tragedy. Titus’ son, Lucius, engaged in a campaign of revenge against Tamora, Queen of the Goths, refuses to allow a funeral only for her: “As for that ravenous tiger, Tamora, / No funeral rite, nor man in mourning weed, / No mournful bell shall ring her burial, / But throw her forth to beasts and birds to prey.” Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Jonathan Bate (The Arden Shakespeare; 2 edition, 2018), 318.
681 Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, 479.
gloomy image of the spirits of unburied people, milling around in the *Vestibulum* of Hades and unable to cross over to the other bank of the river Styx, in Book VI of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. The Sibyl, priestess and seeress, accompanying Aeneas on his journey to the underworld, explains:

And the great rout you see is helpless, still not buried. That ferryman there is Charon. Those borne by the stream have found their graves. And no spirits may be conveyed across the horrendous banks and hoarse, roaring flood until their bones are buried, and they rest in peace.683

**The Inhumanity of the Twentieth Century**

In his journal on the First World War, Paul Cazin referred to the Homeric tradition. The view of the corpses of anonymous soldiers scattered among the trenches brought to mind the wandering Ulysses. But this is a Ulysses of the twentieth century, who never finds the road home, does not return to his relatives, and does not rest in a grave. His rotting body sinks into the mud of the battlefield, and though he goes down as a legend, he disappears from living human memory. Here is a passage from Cazin’s journal under the date 22 March 1915:

Ulysses is the great lost one. The gods turned him into the most lost of all people. Is he not also one of those unnamed dead who are scattered so close between the stumps and whose bones bleach in the rain? Is he not one of those who dry out on the wires, effigies in rags, hopping around in this macabre game? Is he not one of those unknown ones, tossed here and there, swept up by the waves of battle, whom artillery shells tear to bits such that not even one piece is left whole? Why did no devoted spirit place him into the hands of friends who would provide him with the sacred privilege of a funeral? Why was no one there to hear what he had to confess before death? Blessed Geniuses of the grave could not protect him under their wings. Harpies savaged him. And today, as in ancient times, the Lost One crossed over into fairy tale, into legend. At the same time, as his body rots, his image falls apart in old memories and imperfect imaginations.684

Two motifs are intertwined with one another in many of the testimonies describing First World War experiences: unburied corpses and rotting bodies left on the battlefield. Let me mention just three representative examples. Ernst Jünger: “All around were dozens more, rotted, dried, stiffened to mummies, frozen in an eerie dance of death. The French must have spent months in the proximity of their fallen comrades, without burying them.”685 Zofia Nałkowska:

Away from the road, in a grassy area, lay a corpse - not buried, long forgotten. [...] Its hands, spread out as if on a cross, were turned palms upward, the skin there dried and cracked. Large, white worms with black heads were crawling around in the cracks, eating rotten human flesh, diligently pulling it from the bones.686

Andrzej Strug: “A heavy, nauseous-sweet odor formed a wall around the silent homes (...), with every step one stumbled upon unburied corpses, where a large number of bodies, contained in choleric hovels, were decaying, crowded together.”687

In a world that had been pulled into a vortex of war, people not only kill each other but also violate the majesty of death. Significantly, in the trenches and on the battlefields of the First World War, death itself was, in a certain sense, taken for granted, and thus suffered degradation. The senseless slaughter of hundreds of thousands of troops, corpses littering the earth carved up by bullets, the dead in the trenches alongside the living, the inability to assure victims a proper burial – all of this caused the world to begin slipping toward “inhumanity.”

When the world betrays the eternal rituals of death, it returns – as Vico wrote – “to a brutish state and again become[s] wilderness.” The wilderness is a state of regression, and within its sphere basic human reactions are not in force. The final and most spectacular blow to the basic principles on which interpersonal communion has been founded since the dawn of time came with the Second World War, which opened the gates to modern, industrialized and bureaucratized genocide. But here, let us set aside the moral questions tied to the twentieth-century wars and the Holocaust, and to the paroxysm of genocide in the second half of the century,688 and focus instead just on the matter of the treatment of corpses. From this perspective, the “inhumanity” of the war experience manifests itself not only in aggression directed against the human being, but also in the fact that death is stripped of its majesty, and the corpse of its dignity. The norm became what had been the violation of norms: degradation, objectification, desecration, and finally the utilization of the human body.

“A City Engulfed by Plague”

Let us move from the battlefields to the Warsaw Ghetto – to the “dead city,” to the city in which death walked “in broad daylight through the streets,” and on whose sidewalks and at whose gates lay corpses that were so numerous that “they have completely stopped causing any feeling of fear in the pedestrian, any horror or indeed any interest or sympathy.” The ordinary nature of dying, the commingling of the living and the dead, the stumbling over human corpses in the streets, wagons moving through the streets loaded with corpses, and the mass graves into which bodies were thrown – all of this reminds us of the scenery, known from the old chronicles, of a city engulfed by plague. In such a city, death – in a sense – cuts itself loose, breaks away from its designated place. During a plague, the city could thus constitute an anthropological model for the ghetto.

The death cart loaded with corpses is one of the emblems of the world engulfed by plague. For example, the chronicle of the plague in Geneva in 1530 describes carts loaded with dead bodies; Daniel Defoe presented the image of such a cart drawn by horses through the plague-ridden streets of London in 1666; and in a chronicle of the plague raging in Kraków in 1707 we read about corpses being carried “out of the city on ladder-carts day and night.” In a sense, death carts...
moved on the streets of the Warsaw ghetto in two dimensions. In a real one – as a material element of the ghetto’s fabric, one of the hallmarks of the ghetto landscape; and in a mythologized one that co-creates the scenery of the “dead city,” a city engulfed by plague.

Images of the macabre carts with corpses evoke an excess, an abundance, a rich harvest of death. Emanuel Ringelblum also described the carts loaded with corpses for transport: “The horse-carts are loaded with corpses, both inside and on top. Two or three boxes full of the dead are piled up.”\textsuperscript{696} And Marian Berland: “The cart is fully loaded, the springs are bending, the horse can hardly pull.”\textsuperscript{697} In another text we read about the macabre image of carts loaded to the brim, from which blood is dripping: “Black two-story carts moved through the streets carrying boxes with corpses, sometimes the corpses lay on top. Often blood trickled from the carts.”\textsuperscript{698} The story of a thirteen-year-old boy illustrates the horror that came with this deadly harvest and continuous contact with an unimaginable mass of corpses. This accumulation exceeded all boundaries; it became unbearable, giving the ghetto an apocalyptic dimension:

He was a helper on a cart-caravan, who collected bodies of Jews on the streets and apartments and took them to the collective graves at the Jewish cemetery near Gęsia [...].
He tells horrifying stories. Always corpses, dead bodies, whole mountains of corpses.\textsuperscript{699}

Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s painting \textit{The Triumph of Death} serves as a metaphorical illustration of the experiences of the little gravedigger from the Warsaw Ghetto. Borrowing from the tradition of the \textit{danse macabre}, Bruegel intensifies the macabre imagery by showing the staggering exuberance of death and its uncurbed power. Bruegel’s nightmarish vision is marked by chaos; the world and people are consumed by a deadly whirlpool. Like the little gravedigger’s story, Bruegel’s painting depicts “dead bodies, whole mountains of corpses.” From among all the various ways to die, they both draw attention to “sudden” death, one that is not the product of war or execution; the corpses in Bruegel’s painting are most likely victims of the plague, and the huge cart filled with human skulls (being pulled by a bony nag ridden by a corpse) resembles the carts used during

\textsuperscript{697} M. Berland, \textit{Dni długie jak wieki} (Warszawa 1992), 24.
\textsuperscript{698} A. and B. Berman, “Zagłada getta w Warszawie. (Szkic kronikarski),” \textit{Biuletyn ŻIH} 45–46 (1963), 153.
\textsuperscript{699} M. Berland, op. cit., 24, 348.
Encounters with a Corpse

a plague. Bruegel’s *The Triumph of Death* is an excellent example of the iconographic imagery of the plague.\(^{700}\)

Carts loaded with corpses are also a sign of how the mysteries of death, which have always been expressed through funeral rites, are laid bare, exposed, and violated. Bodies change into products, becoming an object of transport, like things. In the ghetto, the traditional attitudes of respect and fear of the corpse are turned on their heads, which is reflected in the very way the reality of the ghetto was talked about. Here are a chain of comparisons drawn from various sources: “a mountain of corpses, men and woman of various ages, lying like a pile of junk set aside for ZOM [Zarząd Oczyszczania Miasta, City Sanitation Board] vehicles”\(^{701}\); “next to the garbage bin, in a sea of blood, lie women, girls and children. An abandoned pile of old and useless rags”\(^{702}\); “children’s corpses lie in a large stack, from one-day-olds to more or less three-year-olds. It looks like a large pile of broken dolls.”\(^{703}\)

**The Cemetery That Is Not a Cemetery**

In order for us to fully realize the meaning of what happened at the Jewish cemetery on Okopowa Street in the Warsaw ghetto, we must take a close look at the foundations of the Jewish cemetery ritual, deeply rooted in Judaism, and at one of its main principles – faith in the resurrection.\(^{704}\) This principle is at the foundation of customs associated with the treatment of a body after death. The funeral is supposed to take place as soon as possible, preferably within 24 hours after the death; a delayed burial is forbidden. Bodies are carefully cleaned, anointed, and dressed in a shroud before they are placed directly in consecrated ground, where they are covered with a board in such a way that soil does not fall on the body, which would be a sign of neglect of the deceased. Burial in a casket

\(^{700}\) See J. Delumeau, op. cit., 146-147.
\(^{701}\) M. Berland, op. cit., 85.
\(^{704}\) The doctrine of the resurrection, which was an object of debate between the Pharisees, who recognized it, and the Sadducees, who rejected it, is treated as a dogma of faith. The *Sanhedrin* states that “since a person repudiated belief in the Resurrection of the dead, he will have no share in the Resurrection.” See Abraham Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud: The Major Teachings of the Rabbincic Sages* (Schocken, 1995), 357. See the full chapter on “Resurrection of the Dead,” pp. 357-363.
is possible. Graves in the cemetery are to be arranged according to a strict hierarchy: according to biblical rules, “the just” ought not be laid in a “grave with the wicked” (see Isaiah 53:9); criminals, apostates, and suicide victims were thus to be buried far from other graves. In some cemeteries, women and men are buried in separate rows, except for married couples, as are little children and women who died in childbirth. This hierarchical order is supposed to be part of the preparations for the moment of resurrection. When the dead rise from the grave, their gathering will be marked by order. Descendants of the priestly families are not allowed to enter the cemetery out of a fear of defiling the dead through their proximity. Thus, priests stay close to the gates without going into the depths of the cemetery, as the family visits the graves. A group of volunteers, the chevra kadisha, effectively a burial society, prepares the body for burial. These volunteers care particularly for the corpses of those who were alone, poor, abandoned, and they treat their work as a manifestation of the highest degree of compassion. The dead are afforded respect, since they carry within themselves the image of God (Genesis 1:26), which is why they are subject to proper rituals and why cremation is prohibited. They are supposed to rest in peace and in an undisturbed state (hence, exhumation is prohibited) until the moment of resurrection, when the vision of the prophet Ezekiel would be fulfilled, when the valley of bones would come alive again with body and spirit (Ezekiel 37:1–14). For Jews, the cemetery is one of the most important of all religious sites, as evidenced by the Hebraic terms given to them, including “house of life,” “house of eternity,” “holy place,” “good place.”

As early as the September siege of Warsaw, the Jewish cemetery on Okopowa became an object of desecration. Nachum Remba, an employee of the Gmina Wyznaniowa Żydowska (Jewish Religious Community) in Warsaw and later a Judenrat official, having made his way to the cemetery under German fire to attend the funerals of Jewish dead, came upon hundreds of bodies that had been plundered for their “valuables, gold and money” and then buried in “mass collective graves.” It was not known who had robbed the corpses: City Sanitation Board employees, the funeral parlors, or gravediggers. Everyone was shifting

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the blame to “common robbers” or “international funeral hyenas.” In March 1940, the trees in the cemetery were cut down, the benches were stolen, and marble slabs were broken up and taken away. Ringelblum noted: “The Jewish cemetery is a depressing sight […] as if it were naked and poor.”

But under the date 11 August 1940, Adam Czerniaków made a significant entry in his diary: “Reflections on the cemetery. Will they give us peace here?” Very quickly it turned out that even this “house of eternity” and “holy place” would not be a place of rest for Jews.

Near the gate there was the notorious graveyard shed, the sight of which caused shivers, and whose reputation reached not just Jews in the ghetto but also Germans who came to view the cemetery. Ringelblum called these people “excursionists,” groups of both soldiers and civilians. While some limited themselves to making malignant comments about the cemetery, “others take various photographs. Particular interest is caused by the shed, in which dozens of dead people can be seen laying every day.” The bodies filling this mortuary, lying around in their final disgrace, were viewed as a kind of exciting peculiarity, which represented yet another act of humiliation. “They lie in piles, waiting for their final rites, exposed to the camera lenses of German soldiers.”

The result of one of these photographic excursions is a series of photos taken by the Wehrmacht Sergeant Wilhelm Jöst, who – on his birthday on 19 September 1941 – took a day-trip to the ghetto, during which he took along his Rolleiflex camera and a couple dozen rolls of film. He visited the cemetery and took several photos showing the inside of the shed filled with a disorganized arrangement of corpses, carts loaded with corpses, and a pit into which gravediggers were throwing naked bodies.

In the spring of 1942, German officials prohibited Germans from entering the cemetery based, they said, on sanitation concerns, but Ringelblum had a different opinion. He claimed that the macabre sight of maltreated corpses had a terrible influence on German morale. But the prohibition did not stop visitors from coming:

706 “Wspomnienia pracownika Gminy i Judenratu w Warszawie (wrzesień-październik 1939),” Biuletyn ŻIH 93, no. 2 (1976), 99–101. This document is located in Part II of the Archiwum Ringelbluma. Nachum Remba’s authorship is hypothetical.
707 Ringelblum, Kronika getta warszawskiego, 114.
708 Adama Czerniakowa dziennik getta warszawskiego 6 IX 1939 - 23 VII 1942, 139.
709 Ringelblum, Kronika getta warszawskiego, 288 (entry dated 20 May 1941).
710 S. Ernest, op. cit., 106.
711 G. Schwarberg, In the Ghetto of Warsaw. Heinrich Jöst’s Photographs (Göttingen 2001).
At the Jewish cemetery there are more and more German trips even though there is a big sign “The Germans not allowed to visit the cemetery.” The reason is obvious: the infamous shed with the bodies [of those who died] of hunger is a terrible indictment against the Germans and their [politics of] starving of the Jewish people.\textsuperscript{712}

Death carts and wagons moved from various corners of the ghetto toward the cemetery, where a huge pit was dug to be filled with a mass of bodies. In Rachel Auerbach’s diary, the cemetery stretching along Okopowa Street, from its gate at Gęsia Street, was an ocean of corpses:

Wagons full of their deadly cargo are flooding in from everywhere. […] Black wagons and carts move briskly along every road and alleyway toward Gęsia Street. […] Like streams, flowing into a great river, which swallows everything.\textsuperscript{713}

Marek Edelman also painted a picture of a cemetery flooded with corpses:

Hundreds were dying at a given instance. The grave-diggers were unable to dig fast enough. Although hundreds of corpses were being put into every grave, hundreds more had to lie around for several days, filling the graveyard with a sickening, sweetish odour.\textsuperscript{714}

The cemetery was no longer a cemetery. Funerals were not performed. The principles of how to handle the dead, sanctified by religion and custom, were being trampled on. The funeral ritual succumbed to its final degradation. In his description of ghetto “burials,” Leyb Goldin got to the heart of the matter – here, death itself was demeaned, brutally deprived of the aura bestowed upon it by culture:

Like dung – that’s how they drop the dead into the grave. Turned the box over and flipped them in. The bystanders get such a livid expression of disgust on their faces, as if death were taking revenge for the aura of secrecy. For the various irrelevant, unnecessary things that had been tied on to him, now, out of spite, he let down his pants and – here! Look at me, kiss my ass.\textsuperscript{715}


\textsuperscript{713} R. Auerbach, \textit{Pamiętnik z getta}, op. cit, k. 39.


Rescuing Funeral Rituals

During the Ghetto’s existence, “normal” funerals were sometimes performed in the Jewish cemetery on Okopowa. The Gazeta Żydowska\(^\text{716}\) published “traditional” obituaries, mourners walked behind caskets, words were spoken at gravesites. The funeral of the attorney Leon Berenson, the famous defender of members of the PPS after the Revolution of 1905 and defender of at least two of those accused in the Brest trials of 1931–1932,\(^\text{717}\) had just a ceremonial aspect. The event took place – as Czerniaków noted – on 24 April 1941 at three in the afternoon. We do not know if the head of the Warsaw Judenrat spoke at the ceremony, but he certainly delivered eulogies on 23 November 1941 over the coffin of the educational activist Cecylia Oderfeldowa; on 22 February 1942 during the funeral of the attorney and member of the Jewish police Maksymilian Schoenbach; and on 17 June 1942 at the funeral of Michał Król, a PPS member, Siberia exile, and secretary general of the Judenrat.\(^\text{718}\) The cemetery remained within the borders of the ghetto until 21 December 1941, after which – along with the stadium “Skra,” where a mass grave had been dug – it was definitively cut off from the area of the closed Jewish quarter. Thereafter, a special pass was required to enter the cemetery.

The pompa funebris was reserved for the elite, while common people – if they still had the means and power to oppose the advancing degradation – tried to save at least the appearance of a normal funeral. In passages from an anonymous diary we read that, based on requests by relatives “who are still able to pay a couple złoty for the body to be cleaned and placed in an individual grave,” the gravediggers were able to find the bodies of particular dead people in the pile and bury them individually.\(^\text{719}\) Janina Bauman, who worked on the “Toporol” campaign to cultivate beets in a distant corner of the cemetery, noticed:

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\(^{716}\) Gazeta Żydowska serves as an example of the “prasa gadzinowa” (often translated as “reptile press”), run in the interest of the German occupiers. It was one of the open Polish-language Jewish periodicals intended for readers in all ghettos in the Generalgouvernement, but above all in the Warsaw ghetto. It was published in Kraków twice a week (Tuesday and Friday), and for a period of time – from 23 July 1940 to July 1942 – three times a week.

\(^{717}\) Translator’s note: “PPS” refers to the Polska Partia Socjalistyczna (Polish Socialist Party), of which Józef Piłsudski was the leader. The Brest trials were trials of the Polish government’s political opponents in the “Centrolew” coalition. As a result of these trials, several prominent politicians spent up to 3 years in prison.

\(^{718}\) See Adama Czerniakowa dziennik getta warszawskiego 6 IX 1939 - 23 VII 1942, 172, 230, 255, 290.

\(^{719}\) See [author unknown], Wrażenia z pokoika śmierci, AŻIH, Ring 1,1030.
a nightmarish funeral procession [...]. Two people from Pinkert [burial society] were pulling a ladder cart, filled to the brim with corpses [...]. An old, bearded Jew, probably a rabbi, was walking after the cart much too quickly for his age, wailing and lamenting as if without great interest.\footnote{720}

In the spring of 1942 a group of social and religious activists set up an association called “Haławajat Hamet” – that is, Care for the Corpses of the Poor. They sent a memorial to the head of the Warsaw Judenrat, Adam Czerniaków, sounding the alarm about the increasing number of instances in which corpses were being profaned. In this text we find reference to one of the concepts that is key to my considerations here: what was happening to dead bodies in the ghetto “is dulling the sense of humanity in people.” In the memorial we read that, within a short period of time, “the basic ethical principles and traditions in relation to the dead Jew have been broken […]. With pain in their hearts, the broad Jewish masses […] watch as corpses are treated shamelessly.” The authors proposed that immediate action be taken, which was to be based above all on helping the poor arrange and pay for the formalities of a funeral, and on assuring that the dead were immediately removed from public spaces to the cemetery.\footnote{721}

In his diary under the date 25 June 1942, Jechiel Górny, writing in Yiddish, described the work being done by a certain porter and a woman junk peddler taking care of dead bodies that had been abandoned on the sidewalks and at building gates.

I had not been in Ostrowska Street for a few weeks, I had almost forgotten about it: at almost every gate - dead bodies, naked, barely covered with a newspaper. In Ostrowska there are so-called sztuby; for a small fee, beggars spend the night there […]. In dirty, gloomy basements without windows, they lie in rows on moist, stone floors […]. The owners wait for someone to die, and only then does the “hotel” business pay, they pull the rags off the dead body, for which you can still get a few złoty […]. The naked body is taken to the street. Two people clean and prepare the dead body, a porter called “Blind Eli” and a junk peddler called “Fat Woman.” Both collect small donations from people - the man on Smocza, and the woman on Lubecki. After an hour, a black cart takes the dead to the cemetery. I want to emphasize, these people are performing this sacred work only out of religious obligation. The porter and the fat peddler are basically honest people, and they often pitch in a few groszy from their own pockets for the funerals of strangers.\footnote{722}

\footnote{720} J. Bauman, Zima o poranku. Opowieść dziewczynki z warszawskiego getta (Poznań 1999), 76.
\footnote{721} See AŻIH, Ring II, 119.
Rachel-Antigone

Two documents were saved from the Warsaw ghetto in which the cemetery shed serves as the object of long and insightful description. Both of them are fragments of diaries preserved in Emanuel Ringelblum’s Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, and both of them contain the motif of the search for corpses in the cemetery. We do not know the name of the author of one of them, which is made up of eight cards of hand-written Yiddish with entries dated 1 and 2 June 1941. The author reports on the funeral held for one Chmielnicki, who had died of hunger, and on the search for the body of his son, who had been brought out unconscious from a labor camp and who died a few days before the death of his father. The author’s search in the shed, serving as a morgue, comes up with nothing. The second document is made up of fragments from Rachel Auerbach’s diary, sixty-four cards with Polish handwriting, with entries dated from 4 August 1941 to 26 July 1942. Auerbach – a journalist, translator and writer who published in both Polish and Yiddish – was associated with the interwar Jewish press and the influential Polish-Jewish daily Chwila, published in Lwów. In the ghetto she ran a soup kitchen for literati at 40 Leszno Street while cooperating with the Ringelblum Archive. From that group surrounding the Archive, only she and Hersz Wasser survived. In 1950 Auerbach left for Israel, where she worked on the creation of Yad Vashem in 1953. The passage from her diary which is of greatest interest to me can be found in the long entry dated 20 September 1941, which involves the search for the body of one Braxmeier, a Czech Jew and athlete who had often frequented Auerbach’s ghetto soup kitchen. Despite her personal attention, Braxmeier died of starvation. Her long diary entry is a kind of report on the search for Braxmeier’s body in and around the cemetery shed. Auerbach’s motivation was to save his corpse from an anonymous burial in a mass grave.

The authors of the above-mentioned diaries were witnesses to the extreme debasement and desecration of the human body. The scene at the cemetery exceeded the boundaries of what had previously been understood as the macabre; it broke the framework of the infernal nightmare; it outstripped all previous images of what was horrific. In that scene there was a collision of the living with the dead that had not been domesticated by any kind of cultural rites. The inexpressible borders of the death experience, their ambivalence, reveal

723 See the above-cited Wrażenia z pokoika śmierci.
724 See R. Auerbach, Dziennik [entries dated: 4 August 1941 - 26 July 1942], Ring I, 641, Ring I, 654.
themselves with full force: simultaneous horror and fascination. The author of the anonymous account did not shy away from describing extreme situations, though this text fits – so to speak – into the category of a traditional discourse, with the conventions of a naturalistic description. Rachel Auerbach, on the other hand, went much further and in so doing created something quite new. She expressed the horror, strangeness, and ambivalence of that limit experience in the form of the macabre grotesque. Though her pen, terribly deformed and decomposing human corpses, scattered and tangled in repulsive poses, trigger a spasm of terror, though they are at the same time comical, the object of laughter. But this is not the liberating laughter of Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, or a “blasphemous devilish cackle,” or the mocking, satanic laughter that “opens the abyss of hell.”

Rachel Auerbach consciously accepted the role of a contemporary Antigone. News of Braxmeier’s death, a lonely but quiet death (“as if he died in his sleep”), was for Auerbach a “real blow,” even though she was already accustomed to so much death. She decided to distinguish this death from all the others, to rescue its individuality, its uniqueness. She wrote: “I took sad consolation in providing him a funeral, in arranging for him a luxurious thing: his own personal grave” (k. 25). Rachel-Antigone wanted to bury Braxmeier’s body with dignity, contrary to the unwritten laws in the ghetto, during – as she put it herself – “death’s busy season” (k. 33). But she did not break any state prohibition; she did not come out against the *raison d’état*; she did not place herself in conflict with any kind of lawmaker. She opposed the “inhumanity” that was striking at the majesty of death; she tried to break down the barriers put up by apathy, bewilderment, and acquiescence to “inhumanity.”

Rachel-Antigone began her search for the body in a stack of naked and anonymous corpses, and in the shed it is precisely that nakedness of the piled-up

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725 For more on the image of corpses in records from the Warsaw Ghetto, see my book *Tekst wobec Zagłady*, op. cit., 215-250, where I develop the concept of the macabre grotesque applied by R. Auerbach in her cemetery description.

726 “Blasphemous devilish cackle” is a phrase used by Łotman and Uspienski, quoted in M. Sznajderman, *Zaraza*, op. cit., 58. W. Kayser wrote about grotesque laughter: “Laughter originates on the comic and caricatural fringe of the grotesque. […] it takes on characteristics of the mocking, cynical, and ultimately satanic laughter […] . [Is it] the kind of laughter that is an involuntary response to situations which cannot be handled in any other way? The laughter which […] sounds more horrible than the most terrible curses?” (Kayser, op. cit., 187).

727 In a conversation with me, Ewa Domańska suggested this interpretive trope.
bodies that strikes her: “[…] nakedness […] shimmering with various pink-yellow tones, nakedness” (k. 33). The motif of nakedness returns often, not just in descriptions of the cemetery shed. The naked bodies of victims awaiting execution, standing in line to the death pit, or crossing the threshold of a gas chamber – nakedness is one of the most expressive emblems of the Holocaust, as evidenced by a wide range of source material, including accounts written by eye-witnesses and survivors, as well as photographs, among which are clandestine photos taken by members of the Sonderkommando at Birkenau. They show naked women moving toward the gas chamber, and they show naked, gassed corpses burning on a pile outside of the crematorium, which in the summer of 1944 was overflowing. Having victims undress to a point of nakedness was not just a matter of practicality, a desire to make use of the clothes taken from the murdered. In the hungry ghetto, still-alive paupers undressed the already-dead paupers in order to sell the clothing off the dead body. But the Germans organizing mass murder had their victims completely undress not for practical reasons, but for metaphysical reasons. Crowds of naked Jews walking to their deaths resembled images of the Final Judgment, the iconographic representation of which had shaped the European imagination for centuries. Here, the condemned were receiving their just punishment and were being thrown into the Abyss. But in the end, piles of naked bodies were in fact testimony to extreme shamelessness and the desecration of the dead.

Beyond nakedness, the cemetery shed forced Rachel-Antigone to confront yet another traumatic reality, namely the animality of death. Ringelblum

728 See, for example, Bezwińska, *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime*.
729 On the refined scenario of the mass murder of Jews, which can be interpreted as a parody of the Final Judgment, and in the context of the nakedness of the victims, see S. Lem, according to whom the spectacle of naked bodies, arranged by the Nazis, can be interpreted in terms of the genocidal aesthetics of kitsch. See S. Lem, *Prowokacja* (Kraków, 1984), 27-28. Paweł Spiewak has pointed to the Third Reich’s central project of self-redemption, whose mediator and perpetrator was Der Führer himself, “who regarded himself as the inalienable, earthly judge at the Final Judgment who would decide on the immortality and the destruction of each and every human being.” See “Szoah, drugi upadek,” *Więź* 7–8 (1986), 9–10. See also G. Steiner, “Sezon w piekle,” in Steiner, *W zamku Sinobrodego* (Gdańsk 1993). It is also worth pointing out the observations of J. Mackiewicz, who – writing about the pits of Katyń – stated that nakedness destroys the pathos surrounding death: “Piles of naked corpses usually cause abhorrence. Piles of corpses in clothing tend to excite awe and dread. See J. Mackiewicz, “Dymy nad Katyniem,” in Mackiewicz, *Fakty, przyroda i ludzie. Dzīva* vol. 12 (Londyn 1993), 65.
wrote: “Terrible atrocities in the graveyard. The mass graves, the mean way of burying the poor, throwing them into graves like dogs […]” In this mortuary on Okopowa, it was still possible to distinguish between the various kinds of deadly stench, but there was no way to talk about the dead bodies in any other way than with the word “carcass,” regardless of whether the matter involved a human being or an animal. As Rachel-Antigone searched for Braxmeier’s body, there was a “sweet, deadly smell. A distinctive smell of a human carcass, different than an animal carcass” (k. 32). The bodies gathered in the shed did not resemble dead humans. They looked like they “were ‘dressed’ in the skin of an animal and put on show, with all of their intimate posthumous alterations” (k. 32). To the author, a dead baby caught by one of the gravediggers with a smooth movement by the back of the neck is a “puppy” that the “mother cat” has taken hold of, in typical fashion, by the teeth. Since death had been stripped of dignity, it stopped being “human,” and became “animal.”

During her search, Rachel-Antigone faced a peculiar paradox. Contrary to the common opinion that death is the great equalizer, the cemetery shed revealed a fundamental inequality and recreated, in grotesque form, the social stratification that was determined, as in life, by one’s financial circumstances. The corpse, as a product of the “death industry of the Jewish cemetery in September 1941” (k. 30), was subject to an extensive hierarchy. The shed space was divided into better and worse, and the number of “respectable” was low. In this regard, while a select few of the bodies were lying comfortably, most were lying “along the walls, abandoned one on top of the other, one this way, one the other way, one facing the ceiling, another one facing the floor, and some in a position unlike anything, acrobatic – in a pile. In piles” (k. 33–34). But this hierarchy of bodies ended at the shed’s walls, beyond which bodies that could not fit into the shed were scattered around, disordered, mixed up with one another such that they formed an amorphous block, no longer having any similarity to people, and thus terrible and monstrous.

Rachel-Antigone stood before impassable barriers. How could Braxmeier be found, how could he be identified from among all the others, given the fact that, after death, the face – a sign of human identity – completely loses its singular and unique features and thus begins to resemble all other corpse faces? There was no way to recognize an individual body. “We did not find Braxmeier, we did not see him, but we did see dozens of other Braxmeiers” (k. 30). In the Holocaust’s morgues, the faces of corpses were all the same. The anonymous author, who

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730 Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, 211.
like Rachel Auerbach also tried to find the body of a friend in the cemetery shed, wrote:

[…] all of them had their heads thrown far back, and their necks tightened forward, as if they were about to be slaughtered. […] Had it not been for their hair and open eyes, they could be taken for skeletons dug up 20 years after death. […] it is not possible that even a friend or relative could recognize such a face.\textsuperscript{731}

In distant Bergen-Belsen, the little Jewish boy Jona Oberski was looking for his father's body in the camp boiler house, which – like the cemetery shed on Okopowa – had been turned into a morgue. On the floor there were:

[…] naked human bodies. […] They were all mixed up, thrown in helter-skelter. […] I tried to find my father. I twisted my head in all directions, to the side, upside-down, so as to look straight at the faces which were tilted at every possible angle. But they all looked terribly alike.\textsuperscript{732}

During the death march westward from Auschwitz, little Michał was looking for his brother's body. At one of the stops along the way, “he went out into the night and looked among the dead, but all of them looked the same, all of them had his brother’s face.”\textsuperscript{733}

Rachel-Antigone did not find Braxmeier’s body, and she was thus not able to perform even the symbolic burial that Sophocles’ heroine was able to perform for Polynceis’ body. The starved-to-death Braxmeier did not receive a dignified funeral; no unfortunate Creon crumbled under the pressure of the gods’ anger; and no Creon rushed “to a clear place, where the naked corpse lies”\textsuperscript{734} in order to bury it. Braxmeier’s corpse blended in with the mass of other corpses, it rotted in an anonymous pile. The contemporary Antigone questioned the sense of her own efforts. Looking over the “death industry of the Jewish cemetery,” she was aware that the entire venture to “give last rites to a lonely human being” was “childish in its unimportance.” She was consumed by doubt about:

[…] whether he would really care if he had to lie like [a nomen nescio] in a fraternal grave with so many others, with whom he, in life, might have stood in a crowded line, for soup, for a bath, for a saccharide coffee with a three-decagram portion of bread. What difference does it make with whom and how one lies after death, when one is already a naked, gray-yellow corpse stripped of its last dirty shirt […]” (k. 30-31).

\textsuperscript{731} [author unknown], Wrażenia z pokoika śmierci, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{732} J. Oberski, Childhood, trans. Ralph Manheim (Penguin 2014), 50.
\textsuperscript{733} H. Grynberg, Memorbuch (Warszawa 2000), 329.
\textsuperscript{734} Sofokles, Antygona, 42.
Rachel-Antigone no longer felt a fear of death, of a dead body; she had cut loose those fears. “And I will never again feel horror toward a dead body. The cemetery shed cured me of the last rudiments of fear of the dead” (k. 34). She was not afraid because she herself was a living corpse.

The epilogue to the story about Antigone of the Warsaw Ghetto plays out after the war, at a time when Gęśia Street was being renamed Mordechaj Anielewicz Street (along which the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes – the first monument erected on Warsaw’s left bank – had stood since 1948 at the ruins of the Artyleria Koronna – Crown Artillery – barracks), and as Władysław Gomułka was about to begin his fourteen year rule (1956–1970) of Poland. The Jewish cemetery in Okopowa Street became once again the object of barbaric aggression. Plans were being made to build an east-west transportation artery – through the cemetery – that would link Anielewicz Street with Młynarska and Obozowa Streets. Such a project would have destroyed around a hectare of the cemetery’s land and eaten up 5,400 graves. As Janusz Sujecki has written, Warsaw’s head architect, Adolf Ciborowski, began to push the plan in December 1956. Lying, he defined that part of the cemetery set for destruction as a “skrawek” (patch) of land, and he argued that the matzevot in the oldest part of the Jewish cemetery “have no value even as a memorial.” He countered opposition from the Jewish community with an official complaint in the Urząd do Spraw Wyznań (Office of Religious Affairs). Plans for this transportation artery were never implemented, thank God, though the cemetery trees designated to be cut down had already been marked with red paint.

Exiting the Grave

In the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus, having received word of Lazarus’ death, talks to Martha about “resurrection,” but what he in fact performed was a “revival.” As Jesus told Martha: “Thy brother shall rise again” (John 11:23). Lazarus was raised and thus returned to life on earth, but over the course of his life he was headed once again toward death. By contrast, the prospect of resurrection is an eschatological matter. For my purposes, I want to

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736 In the Polish original, Professor Leociak cites the Biblia Tysiąclecia (the Millennium Bible), the main Polish Bible translation, used in the Roman Catholic Church in Poland.
draw a clear distinction between resurrection and revival, and to emphasize that what is of interest to me here is that sphere of phenomena that – in an anthropological sense, not in a theological sense – one can define metaphorically as a “revival.”

The Gospel story about the revival of Lazarus highlights his real death. Martha, sober and practical, warns Jesus, who had ordered the stone to be rolled away: “Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days” (John 11:39). One must differentiate Lazarus’ real death from a condition resembling death, from a situation in which the human being is nudged toward death, a death intended for him, but a death which – by some stroke of luck – he manages to avoid. Precisely such situations – in which a person stands face to face with death, in which a person “experiences” (in a metaphorical sense) his own death – will continue to be my focus here.

Jesus wept at Lazarus’ tomb. Exegetes point out that the Greek expressions used in the Gospel text indicate a powerful reaction of disapproval, and even anger, a state of being upset, of internal agitation. In his wide-ranging commentary included in the Latin-Polish edition of the Bible representing nineteenth-century exegesis, the Jesuit Menochiusz interpreted Jesus’ condition as “outrage – against death and the devil, through whose envy death came into the world.” Modern exegesis emphasizes a lack of faith on the part of those lamenting. The mourners’ despair closes with a purely human reaction, as if they were ignoring Judaism’s well-known maxim about resurrection. It also points to the fact that Jesus hides his agitation toward the grim harvest of death. The mystery of Jesus having wept at Lazarus’ tomb thus directs us toward the unfathomable horror of death, in the face of which even God is shaken. The situations I consider here are precisely those that reveal this irreconcilable horror.

In the canonical Gospel of John, Lazarus exited the tomb still in grave clothes. He said nothing. Jesus instructed those gathered around to take off those clothes and to let Lazarus go. In the apocryphal gospel we also find no statement by Lazarus. The revived one remains silent.

For me, narratives of revival, understood as an anthropological metaphor, are a fundamental object of reflection. Stories of those who made their way to

737 Biblia Święta Łacińsko-Polska, vol. III (Wilno 1896), 312.
Exiting the Grave

the edge of the afterlife only to return, and stories about what they witnessed, fill the pages of mythology and literature. Orpheus traveled to the underworld to retrieve Eurydice, who had died of a snake bite. Odysseus went there to ask Tiresias for a prophesy about his return to Ithaca. Along with the bard Sybil, Aeneas visited Hades before moving on to Elysium. Gilgamesh, shaken by the death of his friend Enkidu, traveled to the underworld and crossed the Waters of Death in order to learn the secrets of immortality. The most famous wanderer through hell, purgatory, and heaven is Dante, guided by Virgil and Beatrice, but the *Divine Comedy* grew out of countless artistic images and stories of the other world that had shaped the mass imagination long before Dante.\(^{739}\) Medieval legends took up the motif of revival, which was present in the New Testament apocrypha, as proof of innocence. Here, the act of returning to life was treated instrumentally, with the person risen from the grave proclaiming the glory of the resurrector and testifying to his righteousness.\(^{740}\) Particularly eloquent are the contemporary Argonauts – that is, people who survived their own clinical death, having experienced what Raymond Moody (author of the world bestseller *Life After Death*) called a near-death experience. Their accounts fill the pages of many books and internet web sites.

Apocryphal literature provides us with information about Lazarus’ words and actions after having been revived. In them we find two polar-opposite visions of the revived Lazarus. One, authored by Karel Čapek, depicts an experience that I would call the trauma of revival.\(^{741}\) The second, authored by Eugene O’Neill, presents something that one might call the euphoria of revival.

In Čapek’s *Apocryphal Tales* (1932), Lazarus is deeply concerned about his health and is panic-stricken about dying. He is no longer the same person; he is buckling under the pressure that came with his return to life, he feels strange and frightened by his existence after death. He complains about being ill:

> “Well, you *are* healthy, Lazarus,” Martha retorted. “You *must* be healthy, since He healed you!”


\(^{740}\) For example, the legend of St. Stanisław’s resurrection of Piotr, who had been in his grave for four years. See L. Siemieński, *Podania i legendy polskie, ruskie i litewskie* (Poznań 1845).

\(^{741}\) Here, the word “trauma” is used more in a general sense (a psychological injury) than in a strict sense as indicated in works by Freud or D. LaCapra, though – I would argue – the two are not antithetical.
“Healthy!” Lazarus said bitterly. “I’m the one to know if I’m healthy or not. I’m only telling you that, ever since that time things haven’t been easy for me, even for a minute – Not that I’m not extremely grateful to Him for – getting me back on my feet; don’t think that, Martha. But once someone goes through what I did, that – that – .” Lazarus shuddered and covered his face.742

Having learned that Jesus had been arrested in Jerusalem, Mary decides to go there immediately. Lazarus at first wants to go with her, but he succumbs to fear and stays in Bethany: “Tears trickled slowly from Lazarus’s eyes. ‘I’d like so very much to go with you, Mary – if only I weren’t so afraid of dying again.’”743

In O’Neill’s Lazarus Laughed (1927), Lazarus does not remain silent, as does the Lazarus in the Gospel, but rather makes triumphant orations which are punctuated with euphoric laughter. In Bethany he sets up a new religion that radiates to Rome, where it attracts throngs of followers. He pronounces an ecstatic joy for life, in which there is no place for fear. He not only rejects the fear of death, but also questions its existence.

There is no death, really. There is only life. There is only God. There is only incredible joy [...] Deat is not the way it appears from his side. Death is not an abyss into which we go into chaos. It is, rather, a portal through which we move into everlasting growth and everlasting life. [...] The grave is as empty as a doorway is empty. It is a portal through which we move into a greater and finer life. Therefore there is nothing to fear. [...] There is only life. There is no death 744

Let us first present a typology of situations in which someone condemned to death manages to escape that death. Those saved from execution can be divided into two fundamental categories. The first contains people who survived but were not allowed to live because they were put out of their misery. The second contains people who survived and were given a chance to continue living.

Those who survived but were then killed did not leave behind testimony. We know of their fates through the accounts of others. Leaders of the firing squad approached the pits filled with corpses or they walked among the prostrate victims to kill them off with pistol shots or with blows of a rifle butt. The injured who managed to crawl out from underneath the bodies were too weak to escape.

743 Ibid., 74.
Exiting the Grave

Such was the fate of the people who, during the massacre of Jews at Berdychiv on 15 September 1941, did not die on the spot.

They crawled out of the grave and over the field, instinctively trying to get as far from the pits as possible. Their strength failing them due to a loss of blood, most of them died there in the field, a few dozen meters from the execution site. [...] Later that morning the Germans and the police took the bodies away, killed those who were still breathing, and buried them again.  

There are many such accounts describing both the annihilation of the Jews and the extermination of the civilian population during the Warsaw Uprising. But for a change, let me refer to accounts from the communist terror in Poland. The author here is Father Jan Skiba, who in 1946–1947 served as a prison chaplain in Wrocław.

One of the most terrible visions involved the three attempts to execute an officer. [...] When the first volley went off, it turned out that only one rifle fired a shot, and the bullet missed the target. The officer [in charge of the execution] ordered that the guns be reloaded. But this time only two rifles fired a shot, and the bullets did not cause a fatal injury. This time the officer could not stand it. He walked up to the man lying on the ground in a puddle of his own blood, pulled out his pistol, and shot him right in the head.

Stories about people who emerged from a gas chamber alive are entirely exceptional in nature. They had absolutely no chance of surviving further. At Chelmno nad Nerem, victims were killed in trucks using gas fumes. Szymon Srebrnik reported that, on one particular day, some people fell out of the trucks alive. “They were all moving, they were coming back to life, and when they were thrown into the ovens, they were all conscious. Alive. They could feel the fire burn them.” Jankiel Wiernik escaped from Treblinka during the prisoner uprising of 2 August 1943. He had seen how half-live people would sometimes be pulled out of the gas chambers:

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When the chambers were opened again, many of the victims were only half dead and had to be finished off with rifle butts, bullets or powerful kicks. [...] particularly the children showed a remarkable degree of resistance. They were still alive when they were dragged out of the chambers [...].

Szlama Dragon, a member of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz, pulled bodies out of the gas chambers.

Once we found a baby who’d been stuffed into a pillow and was still alive. [...] We took the bundle to Oberscharführer Moll and told him that he was alive. Moll took the kid to the edge of the pit, put him on the ground, stepped on his neck, and threw him into the fire.

Doctor Miklós Nyiszli recalled that once, as the corpses were being removed from a gas chamber, a live sixteen-year-old girl was found. Along with the Sonderkommando prisoners, he immediately attempted to resuscitate her. The girl regained consciousness.

Perhaps she remembered that everyone had had to undress. [...] All of a sudden the lights had gone out, leaving her enveloped in total darkness. Something had stung her eyes, seized her throat, suffocated her. She had fainted. There her memories ceased.

They all wanted to help the girl, but they all understood that the girl was doomed. No one, not even those in the Sonderkommando, could come out alive from the crematoria. No one could betray the truth, no one could break the code of silence. No one could survive this execution. More importantly, no one could talk about it. Which is precisely what determined the girl’s fate. SS-Oberscharführer Erich Muhsfeldt from Crematorium I handed down the sentence:

If she had been three or four years older that might have worked. A girl of twenty would have been able to understand clearly the miraculous circumstances of her survival, and have enough foresight not to tell anyone about them. She would wait for better times, like so many other thousands were waiting, to recount what she had lived through. But Muhsfeldt [Muhsfeldt] thought that a young girl of sixteen would in all naiveté tell the first person she had met where she had just come from, what she had seen and what she had lived through.

749 Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz* (Yale Univ. Press, 2014), 141.
The girl was killed with a bullet in the back of the neck. Another member of the Sonderkommando, Eliezer Eisenschmidt, recalled probably the same event.

The group of execution survivors is quite large, and it includes those who were pardoned at the last minute. Though the executions were not carried out, these people had stood face-to-face with death. Literary characters are members of this group (the title character in Słowacki’s play Kordian, and Pablo Ibbieta from Jean-Paul Sarte’s story “The Wall”), as are real-life characters, such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, whose death sentence – handed down on 22 December 1849 during the trial of the Petrashevsky Circle – was commuted at the last moment to four years of hard labor in Siberia.

And then there are mock executions. This particularly refined form of torture keeps the victim alive, but only after that person has been forced to experience the full fear of death, to experience every stage of being killed, except the last. Two examples. Just before the liquidation of the Białystok Ghetto in August 1943 the Germans gathered a group of Jews together and ordered them to dig a large grave. By this time, the victims were perfectly aware of the *modus operandi* of a mass execution. They knew what awaited them. As they stood over the prepared grave – one of those who survived reports – “one thinks only of taking a quick bullet, so as not to have to hear the laughter of the shooters and not to have to look at their faces.” But the Germans ordered the Jews, who were prepared for death, to lug sacks of potatoes and dump their contents into the open graves, after which they set free the would-be condemned. Leib Rotsztajn told the story about a double mock execution in the Baranavichy ghetto. Jews were led into a square where a deep pit had been dug, around which machine guns had been set up. They were told to go down into the pit, turn around, and put their hands up.

We were waiting for a bullet, many of the Jews were mumbling under their breath, I understood that they were preparing for death with prayer. We knew we would die. No one wanted to die on such a beautiful, sunny day, knowing at the same time that we were innocent.

But a moment later the order came for them to leave the pit. The Jews crawling out of the grave were met by German laughter. Trucks took them to some other

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751 See Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 231.
752 See F. Landau, account submitted on 10 November 1945 at the Wojewódzka Komisja Historyczna in Białystok, AŻIH, Relacje 301/1267, trans. from the Yiddish by J. Jakubowska.
Encounters with a Corpse

place, where they were read the charges against them (they were to be executed in exchange for the fact that ten Germans had been murdered). They were told to walk down into a pit that they themselves had dug, from which they could see rifle barrels pointed down at them.

The officer raised his arm and the guns let loose. I fell, but I felt that I was still alive. No bullet had struck me. I think and find myself envying the others, since I will no doubt be buried alive. I look up and see that everyone is alive. Suddenly the order “turn around.” Turning around, we see the Germans bent over laughing. 753

What is of interest to me below are those on whom an execution had been carried out, but who survived.

We find in criminal records a surprising number of cases in which people survived the gallows. Historians of the British judiciary suggest that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were several dozen such cases. Let us take three of the most famous. On Christmas Eve 1705, John Smith – a soldier and sailor sentenced to death for burglary – was executed in Tyburn (where London’s Marble Arch now stands). He hung by a rope for a good fifteen minutes, giving signs of life the entire time. The crowd began to call out for a reprieve. He was pulled down, taken to a nearby home, and revived. People immediately began to ask him questions about his impressions of the experience, and Smith was glad to share his views, which readers of Raymond Moody’s book Life After Death would find strangely familiar. The conclusion of the story is not exactly inspiring. Smith did not give up his criminal ways, though he “slipped from the noose” two more times. Another example: Maggie Dickson, found guilty of infanticide, was hanged in Edinburgh in 1724. Her body was put into a coffin, which was placed on a wagon. The wagon took off, bouncing along the bumpy road. Having stopped at an inn, the driver returned to the wagon only to see Maggie alive, sitting up in her coffin. The court decided the accused could not be hanged twice and it pardoned her. Maggie Dickson took advantage of her life, miraculously returned, to bear a large brood of children. The third example: sixteen-year-old William Duell was hanged in Tyburn on 24 November 1740 for raping and murdering Sarah Griffin. According to practices common at the time, his body was to be quartered and offered for use by anatomy students. But the young murderer

753 See L. Rotsztajn, account submitted on 11 March 1945 at the Wojewódzka Komisja Historyczna in Białystok, AŻIH, Relacja 301/77, trans. from the Yiddish by A. Bielecki.
woke up on the dissection table, and he was transported to Newgate prison. He was also pardoned.\footnote{All of these examples are derived from The History of Judicial Hanging in Britain. See http://www.richard.clark32.btinternet.co.uk/hanging1.html (accessed 25 May 2008).}

The most famous convict in Victorian England never had a chance to hang from a rope, even though all procedures for hanging had been followed carefully. The date was 23 February 1885. A crowd was already waiting in front of the prison at Exeter. John Henry George Lee, sentenced to death for the brutal murder of his employer, Emma Keyse, at Babbacombe Bay in Devon county, was strung up three times, each time unsuccessfully. According to reports filed by the prison warden, by the sheriff, and above all by the master of ceremonies and first-class professional executioner James Berry, the trap door under Lee's body stuck three times. The gallows had been carefully checked the day before, and no problem was found. After the trap door failed the first time, Lee was taken aside, where he waited for the mechanism to be tested. The tests were successful, and the convict stood once again on the gallows with a noose around his neck. Once again the trap door failed to open. Guards tried to loosen the door with axes and crowbars, but to no effect. The third attempt also failed. Lee returned to his cell. His death sentence was reduced to life in prison. After 23 years, he was released. He knew perfectly well how to make use of his unusual experience. His story about life in an English prison and, above all, about his experiences as “the man they could not hang” (which is what he was called in the tabloid press), turned into a source for fame and fortune. Lee sold the rights to his story to Lloyd’s Weekly News, a penny-press newspaper that also wrote widely on Jack the Ripper. Lee emigrated to the United States, where he died in 1945.\footnote{See M. Holgate, I. D. Waugh, The Man They Could Not Hang: The True Story of John Lee (Stroud, Gloucestershire 2005).}

Michał Maksymilian Borwicz (Boruchowicz) – author of concentration camp memoirs, analyst of the Nazi language of hate, editor of works of poetry about Jews under the German occupation, a pioneer in sociological-literary scholarship on Holocaust testimony – survived his own execution at the Janowska concentration camp in Lwów. In his case, the noose literally broke. He had been working in the camp underground, teaching chosen prisoners how to use weapons. During one of those lessons he was caught by an SS-man. He stood on the gallows. Later, he remembered the final seconds before the sentence was to be carried out.
I see the SS-man approaching me. Around me something of a vague commotion ensues, […] a chaotic tussle, my view - not of the gallows but of the end of a rope being dragged along the ground. I am still aware that I am losing my footing. I get the feeling I am being strangled - terrible, yet grotesque, since it is so ridiculously expected. And the hazy awareness that it is really all over - the end. Was I really conscious of all this at the moment of my “resurrection”? Or did I reconstruct it all only later? […] Even in such a reconstruction the entire scene is reduced to a few details. My sudden awakening on the ground. […] A sensation of being in a deep haze. […] My friends told me later that - at the very moment I was hanging in the air - the rope broke. I fell to the ground.  

After he had picked himself up off the ground and rejoined the other prisoners, the German overseeing the execution said: “An old Germanic custom demands […] that a condemned man who breaks free of the gallows will be pardoned.”

As one who had “broken free of the rope,” Borwicz was treated specially. He was respected even among the SS-men.

There is one more group of execution survivors, namely those who were executed but survived and then dug themselves out from under the corpses, crawled out of the death pits or mass graves, and escaped the perpetrators.

Mass executions have never been 100 % effective. Somebody always survives. Thanks to those who managed to escape the grave and live to tell their stories, the world has learned about these crimes. There is a large number of such stories, and we could fill a large anthology with them. For me, the main source here will be the records from the Second World War involving Jews who survived extermination operations and Poles who survived executions during the pacification of the civilian population during the Warsaw Uprising.

On the basis of multiple testimonies, we can construct a model of the situation of interest to us here – its particular phases, and the kinds of behavior and types of experiences had by those who “exited the grave” (thus, the “revived”) and by those who then encountered them.

Everything began with the firing squad. Mass executions of Jews were usually schematic in nature and followed procedures that were downright monotonous in their banal brutality. The victims were forced to dig their own graves or were herded toward pits prepared beforehand. They were ordered to undress. Then they had to stand on the edge of the pit or on a plank thrown across the pit, or to lay down directly on the bodies of those already murdered. The climax of this phase came with German gunshots and Jews falling into the pit immediately after (or a split second before) the shots went off. Sometimes an individual victim

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757 Ibid., 25.
would not be injured or even grazed by a bullet. Jonasz Stern told the story of how he was taken with other prisoners from the Janowska camp to a forest outside of Lwów: “And here they were supposed to shoot me. But I tricked them and fell earlier.”758 The sixteen-year-old Zvi Michałowski – the son of a melamed from Ejszyszki – “fell into the grave a split second before the volley of fire hit him.”759 With other Jews from Słonim, Salomon Szlakman stood in front of an execution squad made up of Germans and Lithuanians. It was November 1941. Darkness had fallen. Guided by intuition, he was able to avoid the shots: “unbeknownst to them,” Szlakman reported, “I fell into the grave, and a second later the machines guns let loose […], a mass of human bodies fell on me with a moan, and after a minute had passed, there was complete silence.”760 A certain boy from Tluste “fell into the pit untouched by the bullet.”761 Children protected in their mothers’ arms as the shots went off found themselves in a peculiar situation when they fell into the pits, still alive. Sara Glejch talked of such scenes in the context of mass executions in Marianpol in October 1941.762 Poles murdered in the Wola district during the Warsaw Uprising had been lined up and shot against walls, in the courtyards of apartment buildings, in cellars. Mrs. Waclawa Gałka, on Wolska Street, was shot at twice, and twice the bullets missed the target.763 Sometimes a person was shot but only wounded. Maria Cyrańska, who survived an execution carried out in August 1944 at Sowiński Park in Wola, testified to the Warsaw Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes that she “fell to the ground wounded. I had been shot in the left arm and some shrapnel had wounded me in the temple and cheek.”764

An inherent feature of the mass murder of Jews was the victims’ nakedness. Men, women, and children entered the gas chambers naked. In forest ravines, gorges, fields, and cemeteries – wherever the death pits were dug – victims were forced to undress before the execution. Describing the scene during

760 S. Szlakman, manuscript put together by the author in September 1945. See AŻIH, “Pamiętniki,” 302/155.
762 See I. Ehrenburg, V. Grossman, op. cit.; quote from R. Rhodes, op. cit, 277-279.
764 See M. Cyrańska’s account in *Ludność cywilna w powstaniu warszawskim*, vol. 1, op. cit., 312-313.
the liquidation of the Horodenka Ghetto in December 1941, little Mendel Rosenkranz stated: “They stripped naked and were shot just like that.”\textsuperscript{765} Women who survived an execution at Ponary in July 1941 said that “dozens of Jews had to undress at the pits where they were shot.”\textsuperscript{766} Over and over again we read in reports by those who survived mass executions such words as: In the forest “we were ordered to go into the pavilion to undress ourselves fully, herded in groups of twenty into the forest, where pits had been dug” (Horodenka, Kolomyia powiat, December 1942);\textsuperscript{767} “we were ordered to undress and lay down in groups of ten, one next to the other” (during a liquidation operation in Łomazy, August 1942);\textsuperscript{768} “we were ordered to undress completely and walk down into the pits, and the Germans sent automatic fire after us” (mass execution in Wołyński Horyńgrad in October 1942).\textsuperscript{769} During her testimony at the Eichmann trial, Ryfka Joselewskà reconstructed the final moments before the shooting began, when everybody was already undressed. Only her father had kept his clothes on: “They began to beat him. We prayed, we begged him to get undressed, but he would not do so. He wanted to stay in his underwear. He did not want to stand naked. So they tore the clothing of this old man and shot him.”\textsuperscript{770}

Those who managed to escape the grave after a shooting – and thus, in a certain sense, after death – were naked. Revived, Lazarus had the grave clothes removed from his body. Execution survivors returned to life with the stigma of nakedness, which hampered their escape and sowed terror among those they encountered. Estera Winderbaum survived the shootings during the liquidation of the Poniatowa concentration camp on 4 November 1943; she crawled out from under the corpses and roamed naked among the nearby peasant huts, begging the terrified peasants for clothing.\textsuperscript{771} After an execution in Horodenka in 1942, once the Germans had “finished their work and left the graves,” a butcher’s daughter “pulled herself out of the pit, naked, [and] made her way to the village of Siemakowce.”\textsuperscript{772} In a story entitled “Krajobraz, który przeżył śmierć” (The

\textsuperscript{765} M. Rosenkranz’s account in Dzieci żydowskie oskarżają (Warszawa 1993), 104.
\textsuperscript{766} M. Fejgenberg’s account in Życie i zagłada Żydów polskich 1939-1945. Relacje świadców, eds. M. Grynberg and M. Kotowska (Warszawa 2003), 533.
\textsuperscript{767} H. Steinkohl, Relacja ŻIH 301/1396.
\textsuperscript{768} B. Goldszer, AZIH, relacje 301/663, trans. from the Yiddish by A. Bielecki.
\textsuperscript{769} A. Rubin Winicer, AZIH, relacje 301/663, trans. from the Yiddish by J. Jakubowska.
\textsuperscript{770} R. Joselewkska – testimony at the Eichmann trial, 8 May 1961, in M. Gilbert, op. cit., 421.
\textsuperscript{771} See E. Winderbaum, Likwidacja Poniatowej, relacja 2209/118-1, Archive Yad Vashem.
\textsuperscript{772} B. Glik talked about this in his account in Życie i zagłada Żydów polskich, op. cit., 372.
Exiting the Grave

Landscape That Survived Death), Kornel Filipowicz depicted nakedness as the execution survivor's burden. In a purely practical sense, nakedness can expose a person's real identity, since the body glows in the dark:

> How can you cover your nakedness so that - when one breaks away from the shiny background of human bodies and finds himself on the rough, light-absorbing surface of the earth – one does not suddenly become an isolated shape visible from a distance? [...] The night still shielded his nakedness well enough. But with the coming day, he would face a cruel reality - how to once again put on that skin that forms the most human of shells - clothing. A dressed person has no idea what a problem nakedness is!773

On the metaphorical plane, nakedness represents the stigmatized “otherness” of the person who has managed to crawl out of the grave. It sets those trying to return to life (and to people) apart from life (and people).

After the shots rang out, and as the victim lay among the corpses, the time came to try and comprehend this state of suspension between life and death, one which evaded consciousness while still being recorded by it. In many accounts, this moment of unawareness is key: am I still alive or am I already dead? A boy from Wyszków expressed this question with childish simplicity and naiveté: “I didn't know whether I was dead or alive [...]. It was completely dark when I felt a kick in the side. I was terrified that the dead were rising up.”774

Ryfka Joselewskaja, from Zagrodzko near Pinsk, was shot in August 1942 only to come back to life when the mass of bodies falling into the ditch began to smother her:

> I thought that maybe I was no longer alive, that it was just that I was feeling something after dying. I thought that I am dead, that this was precisely the feeling that comes after death. Then I felt that I was suffocating, people were pressing down on me. I tried to move and then I felt that I am alive and that I could get up.775

Henryk Bryskier, who was shot on 24 April 1943 in the Warsaw Ghetto at the Brauer szop on Nalewki Street, reflected broadly (“philosophized”) on this subject:

> I could not assume that I was alive, and yet, [though I was in fact] still alive, I believed that I was dead. It seemed to me that life and death did not follow one another, but rather existed alongside one another other at every moment. I fell into a dark chasm. Then it was as if my astral body was floating through space with clouds sometimes below and

774 H. Grynberg, Dzieci Syjonu (Warszawa 1994), 22.
775 R. Joselewskaja, op. cit., 422.
Encounters with a Corpse

Sometimes above. I do not know whether I subconsciously opened my eyes a bit or whether the rays of the sun broke through my eyelashes to the narrow slit of my lowered eyelids, but I do know that a kind of vague consciousness came into play, thanks to which I understood that I was not being cradled by the clouds, but lying on the earth and peering up - as if through a fog - at the sky, where I could see white clouds guided by a light breath of wind. I was afraid to open my eyes wider, onto which that wind had carried a layer of dust, because if I was in a state of nirvana, then it seemed a pity to return to reality. This philosophizing took place in a moment of physical paralysis, but also as my cerebral lobes were beginning to function again.\textsuperscript{776}

The experiences described here seem to make up a scenario that repeats itself in hundreds of accounts from people who have returned to life after clinical death. But it is telling that Bryskier rationalized the mystical aura of his near-death experience and even added a certain dose of irony.

On 3 August 1944, the Germans pulled Antoni Czarkowski from a burning building on Oleandrów Street in Warsaw and shot him. His thinking, freed by the bullet, wavered between “hallucination and reality,” between “body and soul”:

I heard behind me only a slight pop. Then humming in my head. A sweet taste in my mouth. Peace - quiet. After an insane level of tension, total relaxation. Finally, the end. I have everything behind me. When I regained consciousness in the street, it was already dark. In the glow of the burning buildings, I saw next to me men’s corpses. I was convinced that despite the death of the body, the human soul must know what is happening with his body. Hallucination and reality were so mixed with each other that it was difficult for me to distinguish between them.

Czarkowski pulled himself away from a \textit{własowiec}\textsuperscript{777} who was trying to pull off his boots, and he jumped toward an open cellar window. He just managed to hear the surprised voice of the perpetrator: “The boy is alive.” \textsuperscript{778}

Sooner or later survivors became conscious of their paradoxical situation. What they had taken for symptoms of death turned out to be evidence of life. The main character of Kornel Filipowicz’s story, lying among the dead in a deep pit,
believed that “death is some dazzling liberation of consciousness from the weight of the body. But then he quickly understood that thinking itself meant life.”

Life’s return to full consciousness was tied to the imperative to save that life. An obvious survival strategy in this kind of situation was to pretend to be a corpse. The perpetrators always tried to finish off the wounded after an execution, so the only chance was to look like a corpse. Children were perfectly well aware of this fact. During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Germans shot at ten-year-old Irka Rubinsztajn and other Jews hiding in a bunker at 38 Świętojerska Street. Irka and her friend Halinka survived. They crawled out from under the pile of bodies: “Then I heard footsteps. Halinka and I lay back down among the corpses, pretending to be corpses.” In order to survive among the bodies, a living person had to look like a dead person. Above all, one could not move. Maria Cyrańska was lying in a group of executed people during the Warsaw Uprising when “a German soldier stood on her back,” shooting at anyone who moved. She managed to endure it.

But simply pretending to be a corpse might not suffice. An additional form of camouflage was often necessary. Here, the dead might be of assistance. Their bodies could cover a person and protect him from the perpetrators’ sight. The dead’s blood could splatter the living, giving them the appearance of a corpse. During the liquidation of the camp at Poniatowa, an SS-man led a woman and child to a ditch filled with bodies, where Estera Winderbaum already lay: “There was a shot and her blood spurted onto my head, covering my neck and hair. From behind I probably looked like a corpse.” Situations in which this solidarity between the dead and the living involved the survivor’s closest family members were particularly powerful, for example when mothers’ corpses concealed their living children. Irka Rubinsztajn described one such situation:

I lay there a little longer and pushed a corpse off me. It was then that I noticed that the corpse which had been covering me was … my mom. Her blood was trickling onto me. Mommy was already dead. […] Halinka was only wounded and was lying there in a faint. I pushed aside the body that was covering her, which turned out to be Halinka’s mother. […]
A son's corpse could also save a mother. Before the Warsaw Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes, Waclawa Galka, who was shot on Wolska Street during the Warsaw Uprising, gave the following testimony:

My son Leszek began to cry, saying that his knees were stiff. Then a gendarme shot him. My little son was lying on top of my cousin Damian Pasterski, who was next to me and had been shot during the first volley. After the gendarme shot my son, his blood trickled onto me and no doubt that’s why they thought I was dead.784

The next link in the chain of events was to dig one’s way out from under the heap of bodies and to the surface. Some accounts present this as a long process, difficult and laborious. Those who managed to make their way out had to watch their every movement. The smallest mistake could destroy their cover and squander their chance of surviving. So they moved very slowly, waiting for all danger to pass, looking for the right moment. Tima Kac, a Vilnius school teacher, lay in the pits at Ponary after an execution of 10 September 1941:

Despite the late hour, somebody was still stepping among the corpses, pouring out lime, digging through the grave. I lay there, holding my breath, listening for every murmur and rustle [...]. Suddenly, nearby, I heard a soft cry. I realized it was a child crying. I began to crawl toward the sound. [...] A three-year-old little girl was crying. She was not only alive, she was not even wounded. I decided to save her and myself. Whenever I stopped crawling through the corpses to rest a while, I hugged the little girl.785

Those who had been shot but were still alive formed a pile with the corpses of their fellow victims in order to escape the deep grave. Mina Gurewicz had only to use a girl’s corpse next to her in order to crawl out of a two-meter pit in Ponary.786 Bialobroda Fiszel, from the Lida ghetto, was buried deeper. So when he woke up he began to “stack bodies. In building this hill, I woke up a young boy and, together with him, I jumped out of the pit.”787 Salomon Szlakman, after being shot in Slonim, climbed out of the grave with Joel Cyberman. They worked together. First they pushed aside the corpses crushing them, and then Solomon tried to estimate the situation: “at the [grave’s] wall we built a kind of platform with human bodies and furtively looked out.”788

784 W. Galki’s account in Ludność cywilna w powstaniu warszawskim, vol. 1, op. cit., 317.
785 T. Kac’s account in Życie i zagłada Żydów polskich, op. cit., 543.
786 See M. Gurewicz, Relacje ŻIH 301/2398.
787 B. Fiszel, account dated 1945, AŻIH, Relacje 301/665, trans. from the Yiddish by J. Jakubowska.
Survivors escaped the grave with great difficulty and great effort. Not only did they have to avoid being seen by their watchful executioners and fight their own exhaustion (after all, they were injured and in shock), they also had to overcome the resistance of the grave itself, along with the bodies filling it. It seems that in order to get out, they had to wage a kind of battle with the corpses. Roles were unexpectedly reversed; the corpses that had saved them, by providing cover, were now in the way, blocking their path, as if they wanted no living person to escape. Ryfka Joselewska provided a poignant account of this battle:

I felt that I was suffocating, choking, but I tried to save myself, tried to find some air to breathe. And then I realized I was climbing over bodies toward the edge of the grave. I lifted myself up and the hands of the corpses began to pull at me, clinging to my legs, dragging me back down. But with a final effort I managed to pull myself out of the grave, and when I had done that, I could not recognize the place. Bodies were lying everywhere, a huge number of dead people. I wanted to see where this field of bodies ended, but I could not.\(^{789}\)

Anna Szaret, a character in Kazimierz Traciewicz’s novel *Yom Kippur*, was shot with a group of labor camp prisoners. She survived and managed to get out of the mass grave. But first she had to wage a real battle for her life:

She detested the corpse lying on top of her, which seemed almost by design, intentionally, to be getting heavier and heavier. Anna was convinced that he was grinning maliciously, that he was baring his teeth through lips parted with pain, that he was smiling with half-open eyes. With a great and desperate effort, she finally managed to free herself from this despicable burden. She turned him over on his side and knelt on his chest. Then there was a leg, but no, it was not his leg, then a hand, which seemed to be trying to hold her down in the pit. They wanted her to stay with them. Never, never ever \([…]\) with violent movements she began to crawl out of the grave. Something snapped under her foot, something shifted. Air, finally air. She drew it in with open mouth. \([…]\) She pushed off with one leg \([…]\) probably off the head of that corpse, and at last she found herself on the surface.\(^{790}\)

Those who had managed to escape from the death pits and now took their regained lives into a dark and hostile world had a choice: they could either speak or be silent. It is significant that this dilemma does not appear in the Polish accounts I have examined. The problem of whether to speak or be silent, along with related questions tied to the reactions of those who listened to stories from beyond the grave, are not thematized within them. But the accounts of Jews who

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\(^{789}\) R. Joselewska, op. cit., 422  
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survived executions reveal two extreme models of behavior. Members of the first group talk about what they experienced; indeed, they feel compelled to talk. This imperative stems both from a desire to shed the burden of an experience that exceeds all human measure, and from a sense of mission that commands them to bear witness to the Holocaust and to convey a message of warning. This group has a clear majority. Members of the second group retreat within themselves and are silent. They remain separate, isolated, divided from other people by an insurmountable barrier. They do not want to cross this line. In this regard, the response of two girls who survived the extermination operation at Tłuste is illustrative: “They dug themselves out from under the corpses and returned to town. But they were behaving as if they had gone mad, and they did not want to speak.”

We might call this attitude of silence the canonical model of behavior, particularly if we recall Lazarus from the Gospel of John, who – having exited the grave – said nothing and simply walked away. Accordingly, one could define the opposing attitude (of speaking) as the apocryphal model.

Under the conditions of occupation, in a situation in which the hunt was on for Jews, excessive talk by survivors – if they were able to talk – was usually severely punished. The compulsion to speak, which – being still in a state of shock – they could not control, led inevitably to ruin. A hospital, which – to a fugitive from the grave – would seem like a safe haven, usually turned out to be a deadly trap. Mendel Rosenkranz reported: “One of those women who survived was pregnant, and two weeks later she gave birth to a child in the hospital, where she talked her head off about this bottom in the forest. The Gestapo came to the hospital, took her and her child away, and shot them at Kolomyia.”

One Miss Kugelmanówna, saved from the massacre at Horodenka, also went to a hospital, “but she talked about everything and the Germans shot her.”

Eight of those who survived the Słonim execution found themselves in the local hospital. “The Germans learned about this fact, it turned out that ‘good people’ had informed them and this group of eight was immediately taken out and shot.”

Every story must have listeners. Otherwise, story-telling becomes an idle effort. Baruch Milch learned of the massacre at Horodenka from “those who managed to escape the grave after the executioners had left […]. I spoke to one of

791 S. Eisen’s account, Dzieci żydowskie oskarżają (Warszawa 1993), 16.
792 M. Rosenkranz, ibid., 103-104.
793 H. Steinkohl, Relacja ŻIH 301-1396.
794 Jachwidowicz, Los Żydow w Słonimiu w czasie niemieckiej okupacji. Account submitted on 30 October 1946 in front of the Żydowska Wojewódzka Komisja Historyczna (Jewish Regional Historic Committee) in Białystok, AŻIH, Relacje 301/1972.
them myself; practically naked, he had fled to our town. He told me terrible things.”795 Milch wanted to listen, but he was one of the exceptions; it was usually very difficult for survivors to find listeners. People did not believe those who had exited the grave. They turned away from them, regarded them as lunatics. Six women who had escaped from the Ponary death pits “told what happened. Nobody wanted to believe their terrifying stories.”796 The survivors’ despair stemmed in part from the fact that they were unable to convey their testimony. It is the despair of a person who has been crushed by the burden of terrible knowledge, paid for in suffering and extracted from death, which is really of no use at all. It is the despair of a messenger from beyond the grave, whose rescue mission is ridiculed and rejected. Moishe the Beadle, from Elie Wiesel’s Night, is precisely this kind of tragic narrator. Having been deported from Sighet and survived execution, he returned to his little town:

Day after day, night after night, he went from one Jewish house to the next, telling his story and that of Malka, the young girl who lay dying for three days, and that of Tobie, the tailor who begged to die before his sons were killed.

[...] But people not only refused to believe his tales, they refused to listen. Some even insinuated that he only wanted their pity, that he was imagining things. Others flatly said that he had gone mad.

As for Moishe, he wept and pleaded:

“Jews listen to me! That’s all I ask of you. No money. No pity. Just listen to me!

[...] I was saved miraculously. I succeeded in coming back. Where did I get my strength? I wanted to return to Sighet to describe to you my death so that you might ready yourselves while there is still time.”797

People who had been shot but survived, though their wounds were still oozing blood; who had been thrown into a pit filled with corpses, and yet somehow escaped – they were wounded once again on their road back from the grave. The people they encountered did not want to listen; they did not want to believe; they did not want to understand, and often did not want to help. They reacted with fear, aggression, or evasion. They refused contact with these survivors. Salomon Günsberg told the story of the survivors of an extermination action in Stanisławów on 12 November 1941:

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795 B. Milch, op. cit., 121.
796 M. Feigenberg’s account, in Życie i zagłada Żydów polskich, op. cit., 533.
They were victims who, only wounded, had escaped from the mass graves at night, trying to save their own lives. Only a handful managed, through their own efforts, to save themselves. The people of the neighboring farmsteads refused to take in those who had already been “put to death.”  

Tima Kac hid for two days in the woods along with five other women who, like her, had escaped from the grave after the Ponary executions: She reported: “We crossed paths with a peasant who took fright at the sight of us and ran away screaming. Later, we met him again and he told us that he had taken us for ghosts, terrible sinful ghosts.” The superstitious fear of the “dead” often served as a reason for their rejection. The peasants whom survivors approached for help often treated them like specters, apparitions, or foul spirits. They warded them off with the sign of the cross or a curse, as they did to Zvi Michałowski from Ejszyszki: “Jew, go back to the grave, your place is there!” They threw stones at them, as they did at Ryfka Joselewksa, who remained in one place for three days after exiting the grave. They threw stones at her so long that she was eventually forced to leave. 

But sometimes people extended a helping hand despite their fears – some of them reluctantly, as if compelled. Estera Winderbaum told the story of an elderly couple she encountered as she was seeking assistance after the liquidation of the camp at Poniatowa:

The old people were terrified of us, they crossed themselves at the sight of these three naked women. The old woman threw us some tattered trousers and a tattered dress. She began to drive us away, frightened that we would attract the Ukrainians. I ran into the kitchen, hoping to warm myself up a bit, but the old woman would not allow it. We had to leave the house. [...] We ran into another hut, where we asked for warm water to wash ourselves a little. We were completely soaked in blood. They gave us water, a blouse for me, since I was still naked, and a piece of bread for each of us. Then, once again, we had to move on.

Others treated the act of helping survivors as simply the Christian thing to do: to feed and clothe. I. Kogan, who survived the Ponary executions, reported:

Covered in blood, I made it to the nearest village and entered a run-down peasant house. A poor farm hand working for a rich Lithuanian lived there. I told him who I was and

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798 See S. Günsberg’s account in Życie i zagłada Żydów polskich, op. cit, 349.
799 T. Kac’s account in ibid., 543.
800 J. Eliach, op. cit., 54.
801 See R. Joselewksa, op. cit., 423-424.
802 E. Winderbaum, op. cit.
what had happened to me. He gave me hot water, so I could wash off the blood, and something to drink. [...] The farm hand gave up his bed for me and the next day he took me back to the ghetto.803

Let us continue the theme of Christian behavior. In the case below, the sight of unfortunate fugitives from the mass grave not only caused tears of emotion. The host also gave them protection under his roof, shared his food, watched over their safety:

[…] we knocked on the door of the first hut, I remember well the owner who let us in and who cried terribly: ‘What'd they do?’ Above all, he gave us water to wash off the blood, and then bread with pork fat, he put us in the home, not in the barn, he stood on watch all night, and in the morning he led us along the winding road to Słonim.”804

Bullet wounds could be washed and would heal. But those who exited the grave carried with them an indelible stigma – the “trauma of revival.” For the people around them, they were now different, irretrievably altered. One could not cross the border between life and death with impunity. One had to pay for it with bitterness that comes with useless knowledge, with alienation, and with the stigma of madness. Folk imagination classified these survivors as specters and lunatics – as dangerous beings, since they had dwelled at the border of two worlds, in between. In one of his short stories, Bogdan Wojdowski drew the following scene:

Franek swears that he saw a naked specter again today at dawn. A specter, just that.
“A specter, my foot. A Jewess escaped from a pit and people saw her at Babice”
“T'm telling you it was a specter.”
“A Jewess!”
“A specter!”
“She escaped from under their shovels and fled naked through the fields.”805

Stealing through the fields, the bloody and naked escapees from the grave were treated like lunatics, though there was no way to determine where their madness began or ended. Artur Schneider told a story about one of those who survived the liquidation of the Dubno Ghetto in October 1942:

The woman had lost her mind. She was walking across the field half-naked, shaking her fist at the bright moon, as if to blame it for what had happened. She wandered around

803 I. Kogan's account, cited by R. Korczak, in Życie i zagłada Żydów polskich, op. cit., 544.
804 S. Szlakman, op. cit., 524. In the published version the host's words “Czto oni zdielali” (“What'd they do?”) are left out. See AŻIM 302/155, p. 12 of the manuscript.
805 B. Wojdowski, Mały człowiek, nieme ptaszę, klatka i świat. Opowiadania (Warszawa 1975), 68.
We find an excellent study of the trauma of revival in Saul Bellow’s novel *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*. The eccentric New York intellectual, Artur Sammler, had once been “marked for death” in German-occupied Poland. He passed through all of the above-described stages in the experience of revival. Together with his wife and a few dozen other people, he stood naked on the edge of a ditch that they had dug themselves. Shots were fired and he tumbled down into a pit. The weight of the falling bodies bore down upon him and his dead wife lying beside him. Somehow he escaped: “Struggling out much later from the weight of corpses, crawling out of the loose soil.”

Having dug himself out from under the corpses, he later became a partisan in the woods around Zamość. He carried a gun and began to shoot people himself. Once, he captured a German, disarmed him, ordered him to undress, and then shot him at close range:

 […] that man to Sammler was already underground. He was no longer dressed for life. He was marked, lost. Had to go. [...] Sammler pulled the trigger. [...] A second shot went through the head and shattered it. Bone burst. Matter flew out. [...] When he fired his gun, Sammler, himself nearly a corpse, burst into life.

Later he had to flee bullets fired by Polish partisans, who had turned against the Jewish fighters. He found refuge in a tomb. The prewar caretaker of the cemetery hid him inside a family mausoleum and brought him food. Years later, Sammler reflected: “By opening the tomb to me, he let me live.”

For Sammler, his existence in the tomb is both a wartime memory and a symbol of fate. “Humankind marks certain people for death,” against whom “there shuts a door.” Sammler belongs to this “written-off category.” He is still alive, despite everything, but certain “idiosyncrasies” – as he puts it – remain in him. Sammler finds it difficult to define his attitude towards himself. What is a person who “has come back from the grave,” and who “for quite a long time [...] felt that he was not necessarily human?” What is a person who has been “inside death?” Is he filled with indifference towards the world or with joy.

808 Ibid., 113-115.
809 Ibid., 190.
810 Ibid.
811 Ibid., 95-96.
812 Ibid., 226.
over the most trivial manifestations of existence? Does he become a pure spirit, completely isolated and liberated from the bonds of Nature, or rather somebody who is particularly sensitive to the material substance of reality and the biological conditions of human life? Sammler is unable to answer these questions. He is a mystery to himself. As an American newspaper correspondent during the Suez Crisis in 1956, he waded through hundreds of corpses in the hot desert sands:

The clothes of the dead [...] were strained by the swelling, the gases, the fluids. [...] In the sun the faces softened, blackened, melted, and flowed away. The flesh sank to the skull, the cartilage of the nose warping, the lips shrinking, eyes dissolving [...]”

He looks at the decaying bodies of the Egyptian soldiers as if at his own macabre self-portrait.

Conscious of his otherness, conscious of his deformity (“I am of course deformed. And obsessed”\textsuperscript{814}), he constructs two metaphors with which he tries to capture the reality of his life after death. One of them is – so to speak – telecommunicational in nature. It places emphasis on the contact that never happened – on the bullet missing his temple and death missing life. Once he had stood naked before an open grave:

But somehow he had failed, unlike the others, to be connected. Comparing the event, as mentally he sometimes did, to a telephone circuit: death had not picked up the receiver to answer his ring. Sometimes, when he walked on Broadway today, and heard a phone ringing in a shop when doors were open, he tried to find, to intuit, the syllable one would hear from death. “Hello? Ah, you at last.” ”Hello.”

The second metaphor is built on the trivial experience of an ordinary day:

And had the war lasted a few months more, he would have died like the rest. Not a Jew would have avoided death. As it was, he still had his consciousness, earthliness, human actuality - got up, breathed his earth gases in and out, drank his coffee, consumed his share of goods [...]. In short, a living man. Or one who had been sent back again to the end of the line. Waiting for something.\textsuperscript{816}

At the end of the novel, this man who has failed to connect, and who has been sent back to the end of the line, meets a dead friend. The meeting scene takes place in a hospital dissection room, just before the autopsy, and comes in the form of an epiphany. Sammler had never been able to precisely describe his own

\textsuperscript{813} Ibid., 207.
\textsuperscript{814} Ibid., 190.
\textsuperscript{815} Ibid., 112-113.
\textsuperscript{816} Ibid., 226-227.
status. To the obsessive question: “They say that you were in the grave once. […] How was it?” – he always replied: “Let us change the subject.”

Now he stands before the body of his friend. He pulls back the sheet covering the man's face, on which “bitterness and an expression of obedience were combined.” Sammler understands that his friend has kept “the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows.” For the first time, Sammler discovers the truth he has carried throughout his entire life, snatched from the death pit: “For that is the truth of it – that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know.” But this knowledge does not belong to the sphere of *episteme*. It is inexpressible; it comes with the removal of the grave cloth from the face of a revived man, one who cannot, or will not, say anything.

It was no victory to escape a mass grave of the Second World War; rather it was a deferred sentence. It allowed the intended victim to feel in his temples the joyful pulsing of blood for years to come, but it left him with a permanent stigma of dread and humiliation. It was not a liberation, but rather the bondage of a person trapped between the black pit of death and the blue expanse of life, between apathy and action, between the courage that comes with having passed an impassable border and the fear aroused by the same event. Between dignity, madness and buffoonery. It was an escape to nowhere, one which led a person along the back roads of existence into a sphere of otherness, into a dimension where the order is reversed, into a crevice of existence, into a state of persistent dilemma.

It seems that the experience of surviving one's own execution – that is, surviving one's own death – resembles the experience of torture, and that it creates a similar state of “stigmatization.” The alienation felt by those who exited the grave and the alienation felt by those who were tortured have a great deal in common.

Torture is more than physical torment; above all, it destroys the will and the spirit, it strikes at the very core of humanity, because it leads to the destruction of identity, it turns the victim against himself. The deadly enemy is no longer the perpetrator but one's own body; it is one's own body that suffers intolerable pain, and it is one's own body that sends forth the scream that erupts from the tortured one's lips. The victim's scream, which turns into gibberish – it humiliates and degrades the victim; it leads to a place beyond articulated speech, descends into an abyss of animal howling and yelping. The experience of torture, understood

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817 Ibid., 155-156.
818 Ibid., 260.
by me here as a limit experience, leads to the destruction of language. The victory of pain is based on the separation of the person experiencing pain from everyone else, on rendering him lonely. Pain can be shared with no one; it cannot be talked about, only screamed. Pain resists lingual expression, and in the final analysis it destroys language; it demotes language to the ranks of unarticulated sounds, and it prevents understanding.

In his reflections on torture, Jean Améry also draws our attention to the indescribable nature of pain; it eludes communication. Pain is corporeality itself. Améry wonders:

But maybe it is even more, that is: death: No road that can be travelled by logic leads us to death, but perhaps the thought is permissible that through pain a path of feeling and premonition can be paved to it for us.

The experience of death thus lifts the victim beyond the border of life and death and makes an indelible mark. Améry put forward the hypothesis that:

[...] torture, through which we are turned into body by the other, blots out the contradiction of death and allows us to experience it personally. But this is an evasion of the question. We have for it only the excuse of our own experience and must add in explanation that torture has an indelible character. Whoever was tortured, stays tortured. Torture is ineradicably burned into him, even when no clinically objective trace can be detected.

It is worth citing one more of Améry’s thoughts in the context of our reflections on those who exited the grave and remain forever separated from people and the world:

Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained. That one’s fellow man was experienced as the antiman remains in the tortured person as accumulated horror. It blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules. One who was martyred is a defenseless prisoner of fear that henceforth reigns over him. Fear – and

822 Ibid., 34.
what is called resentments. They remain, and have scarcely a chance to concentrate into a seething, purifying thirst for revenge.”

Jolanta Brach-Czaina has written about a kind of elevation of those who became the victim of what she calls negative tragedy. An attack of annihilating and unrelenting evil, of brutality that causes paroxysms of fear, sets in motion within us an irreversible process of destruction, one against which we cannot defend ourselves. This destruction “has no justification in either actions or choices; it is beyond the reach of the persecuted one’s will.” In such situations there emerge what Brach-Czaina calls the “limit properties of existence.” Following the trail blazed by Brach-Czaina, not only am I able to get at the heart of my reflections on how those who had survived their execution were marked, but I also enter that sphere of limit experiences that form the subject of my entire book.

We are powerless in the face of such evil aggression, so understood. We know that there is no way out, no return, no hope at all. There is only failure. There are only pits dug with the victims’ own hands and rifles aimed at heads. Such evil aggression divides an individual’s fate “into two incommensurable parts: before and after the event. If a person survives the event.” The fates of those who survived gun shots fired by execution squads, and who managed to exit the grave, were similarly divided.

A condition for true tragedy, Brach-Czaina argues, is absurdity and randomness. Which is why we are not able to reconcile ourselves with it, we cannot accept it. It is a tragedy without catharsis. It is negative tragedy, in which evil is triumphant, and this triumph, though unnecessary, is irreversible. It is accompanied by desperation and a sense of guilt on the part of the victims. By the victims’ loneliness and stigmatization. “Tragedy cuts off and sets apart the person who has experienced it; it places the victim in a space to which no one else has access.” Negative tragedy catches the victims in a trap, it imposes itself completely, it renders defense impossible. The victims put up no resistance, since resistance is impossible. They can only gaze at the destruction of themselves, of their relatives, of their world. But destruction of this kind reveals a particular axiological situation – the author argues – since “the ones affected by the brutality of criminal

823 Ibid., 40.
825 Ibid., 140.
826 Ibid.
827 Ibid., 146.
mural not as a result of their own guilt, against their own will, and having nothing to do with their own actions and attitudes, become part of an event that opens a view onto a fundamental value of existence.\(^{828}\) Brach-Czaina’s philosophical argument leads us to the conclusion that “absurd cruelty is an existential shock that brings about awareness,”\(^ {829}\) that reveals the value of existence as “a tragic value, because it binds the invaluable with the promise of annihilation.”\(^ {830}\) Paradoxically, the negative experience of cruelty, which crushes the victims and ends their existence, affirms their existence. “In the face of the cruel event, our existence grapples with itself, becomes stronger, grows. […] With every blow, the tormentor singles out the tormented, lifts them beyond their selves, while he himself becomes smaller. […] Meanwhile, those subjected to cruelty become inviolable, untouchable.”\(^ {831}\) They are stigmatized, marked, exalted, cut off from others, doomed to remain in existential loneliness, from which there is no way out. Around them is an “empty circle” – a sign of “the presence of fate’s anointed one.”\(^ {832}\)

The experience described in the accounts cited above is a traumatic one. But Elias Canetti seems to think otherwise. Referring to the “stories of people who come back to life in the midst of a heap of the dead,” he claims that “such people tend to think of themselves as invulnerable.”\(^ {833}\) It is difficult to agree with this claim. Survivors who have told us their stories gained no sense of triumph over death, or ecstatic affirmation of life, from their having exited the grave. Quite the contrary. Some of them, like Tima Kac, envied the dead for the fact that they were already liberated from horror. Others, like Ryfka Joselewkska, prayed for death, begging God to open the grave once again so it would devour her. Perhaps we can understand Canetti’s thinking based on the two different visions of Lazarus from the apocryphal literature presented above. While Eugene O’Neill depicted

\(^{828}\) Ibid., 158.

\(^{829}\) Ibid., 162.

\(^{830}\) Ibid., 163.

\(^{831}\) Ibid., 164-165.

\(^{832}\) Ibid., 167. This analysis of the victims of negative tragedy and their condition is remarkably similar to the descriptions of survivor syndrome from the Holocaust. Henryk Grynberg pointed this out in his essay “Nowoczesne wielkie zło,” which broadly examines the chapters in Brach-Czaina’s book “Święte zło” and “Nietykalność,” and which states that she had offered “the most intelligent answer to the agonizing question – what was the Holocaust? Despite the fact that she never mentions Jews.” H. Grynberg, “Nowoczesne wielkie zło,” Res Publika Nowa 5 (1994), 10.

\(^{833}\) Canetti, Crowds and Power, 247.
the euphoria of revival, Karel Čapek presented the trauma of revival. The author of *Crowds and Power* seems to have followed in the footsteps of O’Neill. But I find myself closer to the Lazarus of Čapek’s apocryphal account – torn, uncertain, and so very fearful of dying a second time.

One final set of comments. Mass killing has not come to an end; execution squads had not gone silent; and machine guns, machetes, knives, crowbars and common sticks have not stopped their work. Rwanda, 1994. “When you ‘clear the bush,’ a few weeds always escape the blade.” These are words told to the author of a book on the Rwandan genocide by someone whose niece had been “macheted, then stoned, then dumped in a latrine, only to get up each time and stagger away […].”834 Srebrenica, 1995. Evidence of the massacre of 2,000 men was provided by five survivors of a death pit. A young man told of another, less well-known execution in the town of Nova Kasaba in Bosnia-Herzegovina. When the Bosnian Serbs opened fire, he fell – injured only in the leg – and rolled down into the ditch with the others who had been shot.835 Kosovo, the village of Izbica, where a massacre of 120 Albanians took place in 1999. Those who survived the execution described the entry of Serb units into the village, the division of men and boys from women, the herding of the condemned into already-dug pits, shots fired from automatic weapons. The injured – still alive and crushed by corpses – waited for the soldiers to leave before they crawled out of the grave.”836

The world’s slaughterhouse remains in good working order. And there are still those whose execution was not completed, who escape the death that had been assigned to them, and who crawl up from under the pile of bodies, in order to give testimony. And the tragic stigmatization and elevation of those who have exited the grave continues.

834 Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (Picador, 1999), 123.