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The Discreet Horror of the Holocaust in Ida Fink's Stories

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Abstract

The topic of the article is writings by Ida Fink. It analyses stories of the author of *Wiosna 1941* (*The Spring 1941*) which refer to the Holocaust. The analysis also draws attention to the poetics of "discreet horror" in which Ida Fink's stories are embedded. In her records the author does not underline the cruelty, but shows the terror of the situation by subtle narrative and compositional manoeuvres. The picture of death is de-emphasised by the psychology of characters, and the main focus are complicated human relationships in which the author with a great delicacy presents various emotional states of people who, despite being sentenced to death, still try to survive the war.

Ida Fink's stories are different from the majority of Holocaust literature which exposes the severity and brutality of mass death. These stories stand out as an exceptional phenomenon among works by such authors as Tadeusz Borowski, Zofia Nałkowska, Leon Buczkowski, Henryk Grynberg or Bogdan Wojdowski.

Keywords

the Holocaust, war, literature, Ida Fink

Introduction

What makes Ida Fink's work different from the Holocaust literature is mainly the way she presents Jewish extermination. Her short prose works have recently been compared to the works of Irit Amiel, Miriam Akavia, Michał Głowiński or Henryk Grynberg (Ubertowska 168; Krupa 171). In her stories published in *The Garden that Floated Away* (since this aspect of her work is going to be discussed) lives of main characters are presented by means of seemingly trivial, inconspicuous scenes which lack dynamics or brutality (Maliszewska 119) – a distinguishing feature of the prose of Tadeusz Borowski, Zofia Nałkowska, Leon Buczkowski, Bogdan Wojdowski, Henryk Grynberg or Tadeusz Różewicz's poetry. Ida Fink does not shock the reader with cruelty but she rather reveals a pervasive sense of dread through narration and composition. There are no disturbing scenes of unloading and selection of the Jews crowded in railway wagons, which is the case with Borowski's stories. There are no piles of human bodies like in *Medallions* by Nałkowska. There is no typically striking horror of war. Depicted events, or to be more precise "micro-events" (Ubertowska 168) described by Fink, occur somewhere "in the suburbs of the absolute Jewish extermination" (Adamiec 62), "on the edge of the main stage" (Śliwiński 21; Szczęsna and Sobolewski). The episodes, which frequently go beyond traditional themes of the Holocaust, (Buryła) take place in personal and sheltered circumstances (Szczęsna and Sobolewski) in "small and steamy surroundings" (Maliszewska 119). Ida Fink's style can be characterized by discretion, calmness, minimalism, as if she was describing her stories "in whisper" (Sokołowska 347; Szczęsna and Sobolewski). These stories are fully credible, and this is either due to the consistently used euphemism and litotes or some kind of lyricism, which softens and blurs the contours of the picture. What is more, her writings sneak out of a poetry of crude and "inquisitive" realism (Tokarska-Bakir 138). The author of *A Scrap of Time* diverts attention from images of death to psychology and focuses on complex relations between the characters. With a lot of delicacy, it also records tragedies of people who try really hard to survive the war despite being doomed for extermination.

Understatements, euphemisms, periphrases...

Ida Fink is usually cautious and reserved when it comes to providing information about characters of her stories. Sometimes she does not even reveal names of heroes, not to mention their surnames. Very often characters appear only for a moment or one event, one conversation or one small scene and then they disappear as quickly as they emerged. This is what happens in her best short stories – “A Conversation”, “Aryan Papers”, “The Key Game”, “Zygmunt”, “The Pig”, “Jean-Christophe”, “Crazy”, “In Front of the Mirror” and many others. Portrayed people do not always have names, as Nisia and Adela in the last of the above mentioned stories. It happens quite often that the narrator uses the most general categories – she only identifies sex, age, sometimes provides the reader with some family background.

In this way we get to know that: the main characters of “The Key Game” are “a man”, “a woman” and “a child”; in “Jean-Christophe” she only mentions “girls” who work on the railways; in “Aryan Papers” a sixteen-year-old girl meets a mature man; the main character of “Crazy” is a dustman who is considered to be a lunatic. The main character of “The Pig” is simply “a person” while in “Nocturnal Variations on a Theme” it is somebody whom we get to know only from his obsessive dreams about being released from the concentration camp. This, however, appears to be only a deceptive temptation, an illusion which always finishes with inevitable, fatalistic return to the camp.

Understatements, concealments and periphrases include also other elements of the world depicted, e.g. a basic fact of Jewish affiliation of the characters as well as social and historical factors of the Holocaust. Fink talks to the readers from her own world, from the depths of her Jewish identity and she does not consider it appropriate to explain in her stories the most basic context of this fight for survival. That is why she is also not going to comment on different behaviors or events, which makes her stories completely different comparing to other texts connected with the Holocaust, for instance *The Black Seasons* by Michał Głowiński (Grynberg 274; Waligóra 159).

Therefore, it is important for the reader to know basic historical and cultural facts before reading Ida Fink’s stories. The author does not hide her message in any way. Some literary allusions or elision enable the reader to create a friendly and deep relationship. However, sensitivity and at least basic historical background about the Holocaust is absolutely crucial. This kind of knowledge will enable the reader to understand why in “A Scrap of Time” a student of architecture lied, contrary to his neighbours, when asked about his profession. He said that he was a carpenter and this lie “saved his life or rather postponed his death sentence for the next two years”¹ (Fink, *Odpywający ogród* 16)² [uratowało mu życie, ściślej mówiąc odroczyło wyrok śmierci o dwa lata].

In this context it is also important to notice various ways of talking indirectly about Jewish identity, both historical and the one which has grown up during the war so much that it led to radical alienation and separation. This happened as a result of “the Final Solution of the Jewish Question”. In “A Scrap of Time” the author uses a periphrasis to describe Jewish stigma by saying: “we the different ones, always different” [my inni, zawsze inni] and because of that fact “condemned to death again” (10) [znów skazani]. The author uses more vivid pseudonyms describing Jews and Germans in her story “A Closed Circle”. Here the reader can find one particularly euphemistic description which presents the Nazis while entering Jewish flats in order to – as we may presume – rob them, move to a ghetto or a camp or simply kill them. These brutal invasions are ironically called “paying a visit”:

During one of such visits, which the uniformed in helmets used to pay to those wearing white armbands with a star of David, into Józef’s room came a man in the uniform, brought by an attentive caretaker, and it turned out that he was a great admirer of art. (41)

¹ All the translations of quotes used in the article (as literal translations for language analysis) by Monika Banach. Their Polish equivalents can be found in square brackets.

² All the quotes come from the works of Ida Fink from the following edition (unless stated otherwise): Fink, I. (2002). *Odpywający ogród*. Warsaw: Publisher: W.A.B. Numbers of the pages are given in brackets.

[Podczas jednej z wizyt, jakie umundurowani w hełmach składali białym opaskom z sześcioramienną gwiazdą, zjawił się w pokoju Józefa – sprowadzony przez usłużną dozorcówką – osobnik w mundurze i hełmie, który – jak się okazało – był miłośnikiem sztuki].

Greed of a German soldier excited about tacky products made of porcelain and bronze made it possible for Józef to remain unscathed. Fink is very consistent in not using words such as “German” or “Germans” and avoids them not only in this particular description but also throughout the whole story as well as in her other works. She is sometimes forced to use various verbal balancing acts which – along with impersonal structures – end up with grotesque effects. A helmet and a uniform become a synecdoche (*pars pro toto*) of a German soldier: “a green wall of uniforms and helmets” [*zielony mur mundurów i hełmów*], “hunters in helmets” [*myśliwi w hełmach*], “the uniformed in helmets” [*umundurowani w hełmach*], “he nodded with his helmeted head” [*skinął uhełmioną głową*], “a person in a uniform” [*postać w mundurze*], “it barked from under the helmet” [*warknęło spod hełmu*]. In “A Scrap of Time” impersonal structures were used to dehumanize the enemy in a different way. The enemy is not an animal, as the last phrase depicted, but they represent ruthless, anonymous machine of oppression and terror: “we were ordered to line up” [*kazano nam ustawić się w szeregi*], “only men were ordered to stay” [*kazano zostać samym mężczyznom*], “the streets were surrounded” [*obstawiono ulice*], “it was allowed to send food parcels” [*zezwolono również na wysyłkę paczek żywnościowych*].

In the story “In Front of the Mirror” euphemisms and periphrasis shape the image of reality in a very ostentatious way. Likewise, the words “Germans” or “action” do not appear in the text although the meeting of Adela and Nisia takes place during a slow liquidation of the ghetto. Incidentally, the word “ghetto” does not appear either. Empty beds were a sign of the death of the relatives: “There were four beds, three of which were useless. The first bed got vacant in summer, the next one – early autumn, and then the third one. Nisia used the fourth one” (159) [*W pokoju stały cztery łóżka, trzy z nich nieużyteczne, najpierw, latem, zwolniło się jedno, potem, wczesną jesienią, drugie, a później trzecie. Czwarte służyło Nisi*]. Then, as if incidentally the author mentions the Nisia’s father – it is when we get to know that Adela sat on his stool.

The story is set in December, probably in 1942, since in that year after the January conference in Wannsee Germans started to liquidate ghettos and the extermination of the Jews. Being aware of the context makes it possible to understand some statements which at the first sight seem to be illogical: “She was tiny {Nisia – JW} and still pretty although three beds were already vacant and one could expect the fourth bed to become vacant soon” (159) [*Była drobna {Nisia – JW} i wciąż jeszcze ładna, mimo że po kolei zwolniły się trzy łóżka i tylko patrzeć było, jak zwolni się czwarte*].

Interestingly enough, it is not only the narrator but also the heroines who use the phrase about vacant beds:

– I know everything, you silly thing... – Adela continued – beds are v a c a n t in my place, too... I know everything. Though I want to know nothing. (160)

[– *Wszystko wiem, głupia... – mówiła dalej Adela – u mnie też z w o l n i ł y się łóżka... Wszystko, wszystko wiem. I nic wiedzieć nie chcę*].

It means that previous narration served as free indirect speech and it exactly reflected Nisia’s fears expressed in fatalistic euphemism: “and one could expect the fourth bed to become vacant soon”.

What is also surprising is how the narrator diverts attention of the reader from an issue of mass extermination to a very individual, private and intimate thread connected with Adela’s falling in love. The contrast between background (the reality and people condemned to death) and foreground (a girl who is dressing up in front of the mirror for her beloved one) has electrifying effects. A burst of joy, Adela’s happiness, her sparkling eyes along with her radiant face seem to be deeply offensive for Nisia. However, such “inappropriate” behaviour appears to be absolutely justifiable – all in all, it is the first and the only time she is in love. That is the reason why the young seamstress reacts not only with a terror but also with humbleness. She meekly accepts this inexplicable eruption of life force which seems to stand in opposition to overwhelming atmosphere of omnipresent death in the ghetto. Therefore,

sobbing Nisia is not only a sign of jealousy and condemnation but also a proof of being helpless in this absurd and inexplicable reality.

In "Jean-Christophe" Ida Fink also presents a whole wide range of experiences of the characters. Once more, she does not explain anything about the world depicted and avoids naming the facts in a straightforward way. The reader must guess who the girls "working in Ostbahn" are and who a woman-controller called *aufseher* is; and what the relation between "an action in the city" and waiting for "a rumbling train" is; why "they shoot and shout and cry over there" and why a girl reading a book is afraid that she will not finish it. Naturally, it is not difficult to guess the right answer so understanding this reality will not be a challenge. However, it is more important to understand the way Fink sticks together the ideas of "here" and "there" by using nervous anticipation, and how successfully she uses discord between idyllic scenery and a "slaughterhouse" still which leaves a beauty of the day unblemished (Kotarska 297).

The dialogue between *aufseher* and a reader of a monumental novel "Jean-Christophe" seems to be crucial here. Once again the conversation about the book and its love threads seems inappropriate in the gravity of this situation. Maybe in a minute the girls working on the railways will see their families transported to extermination camps in Bełżec or Sobibór so they listen closely and wait in nervous anticipation. Meanwhile "the thin and black one" is only worried if she manages to finish her book whilst *aufseher*, described by the narrator as "gentle", tries to comfort her.

This act of consolation seems to be very light-hearted and it closes a trivial dialogue about reading and borrowing books in a grotesque way. Such a dialogue would be much more appropriate in the times of peace: "But you will definitely manage to finish it, after all it's not that thick" (65) [*Ale zdązysz, na pewno, taka gruba znowu nie jest*]. In the words of *aufseher* the reader can notice inevitability of the girl's death as well as consent for that to happen. Despite its best intentions, this doubtful consolation only means that the girl will live long enough to at least finish the book.

As the reader can observe, euphemisms, periphrases, ellipses and understatements play an important role in Ida Fink's stories. It can be visible on different literary levels – in language, the mentality of characters, the world depicted, the plot. This style is not supposed to camouflage, distort or erase the Holocaust as it happens in the case of all euphemisms typical for the Nazi totalitarian language, described by Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany (29-47).

In that latter totalitarian usage, euphemisms hide and weaken dread and terror of reality. They are not only a way of introducing propaganda taboo but they also signify indifference to the Holocaust and contempt for its victims. Sometimes they are used to twist the meanings of some words in an impudent and cynical way. Kuczyńska-Koschany presents some convincing examples (based on *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann):

... not to tone down the meaning but to hide it, to confuse readers and listeners; gas chambers were called "bath houses", gassing was called "disinfection", cattle wagons – "special trains", murderer – "a sanitary officer". The prisoners who were taking bodies out of gas chambers and were preparing corpses to be cremated were called "The Blue Sky Unit" (*Himmelskommando* . . . , cf. *Himmelfahrt* – Ascension, Assumption), a place of execution – "field hospital", shooting into the neck – "treatment with a pill". (32)

[... *nie tyle by złagodzić znaczenie, co by je ukryć, by zdezorientować odbiorców komunikatu językowego, komory gazowe nazywano „łazniami”, zagazowanie – „dezynfekcją”, bydłące wagony – „pociągami specjalnymi”, mordercę – „oficerem sanitarnym”, tych więźniów, którzy wyciągali ciała zabitych z komór gazowych i przygotowywali zwłoki do spalania w krematorium – „komandem niebiańskim” (Himmelskommando {...}), por. pokrewne: Himmelfahrt – wniebowstąpienie, wniebowzięcie), miejsce egzekucji – „lazaretem”, zabijanie strzałem w kark określano zwrotem „leczyc pigułką”].*

In Ida Fink's artistic vision the reader deals with something completely different. It gives an impression of a transparent curtain made of fabric full of subtle periphrases and euphemisms surrounded by a veil of understatements and skilfully erased contours. The tragedy of the Holocaust

remains in the shadow, between speculations, guesses and images triggered by a subtle and evocative structure of the story. Combining all those aspects together is what makes the author's style so unique while her vision is full of discreet horror.

On the one hand it is possible to notice in here the character of the author herself who is not fond of brutality and abruptness. On the other hand, it is a kind of a sanctifying and protective gesture (cf. Kuczyńska-Koschany 45) as if naming things straightforwardly would pose a threat to the honour of the murdered, depriving them of dignity, reducing psyche and emotions to the level of numbing fear, pain and instincts forced by the Nazis.

Lyrical metonymies

Toning down the Holocaust narration in Ida Fink's stories takes also a form of unobtrusive, subtle and figurative character of her works. Her prose describes the world depicted through the senses and affectionate self-restraint. In dramatic moments it looks as if the words were stuck in her throat, so similar to Różewicz's poetry (Maciejewski). It is skilfully depicted in a scene from "A Spring Morning" where Aron and Mela's five-year-old daughter is shot: "On the edge of the pavement a small bloody shred was lying. Thin smoke of a shot was hanging in the air fading in the blowing wind" (112) [*Na skraju chodnika leżał mały skrważony strzępek. W powietrzu wisiał nikiący na wietrze cienki dymek wystrzału*]. Periphrastic metonymy ("a small bloody shred") presents through diminutive forms and affectionate objectification a dead child, which triggers feeling of compassion and pain. All hopes of the parents were in vain and disappeared like a "thin smoke of a shot".

What catches the reader's attention in "The Garden that Floated Away" is an unrealistic, poetic image of a garden which moves away:

Wojciech's garden, who was a friend from our childhood, shuddered suddenly, moved and swayed and started to float away like a huge, green ship. It was moving away slowly but steadily, the distance between us was rapidly growing. It started to shrink and fade away. It was vanishing into unreachable distance, impossible to overcome. (55)

[Ogród Wojciecha, przyjaciela naszego dzieciństwa, drgnął nagle, poruszył się, zakołysał i zaczął wolno odpływać jak wielki, zielony okręt. Oddalał się powoli, lecz nieustannie, odległość pomiędzy nim a nami zwiększała się gwałtownie, malał, nikł. Odpływał w dal niedosiężną, nie do pokonania].

The garden which floats away signifies that the subject became immobilized and isolated from its nearest area, becoming its subjective centre, while the outside world is set into motion. It can remind the reader of a poem by Cyprian Norwid "To citizen John Brown" where the laws of physics are equally controversial and this, in turn, intensifies the feeling of loneliness of the main character. At the same time, it presents contempt to the unjust reality in which a man fights for the rights of African-Americans. In this poem Brown "kicks away the debased planet" [*odkopuje planetę spodloną*] while in "The Garden that Floated Away" – Wojciech's garden moves away from the heroine. Contempt is replaced by sadness and disappointment.

The whole story is based on the idea which, in a poetic and surrealistic way, expresses the end of a harmonious and neighbourly coexistence. However, the meaning of the metaphor goes beyond local perspective – the heroine (and also the narrator) realizes that Jews and Poles have ultimately drifted apart. The metaphor sets and presents a symbolic moment of this inevitable, melancholic separation. This metaphorical force runs through the whole story about gardens – an avenue of currants "sews them up with a neat stitch" [*zszywa je równym ścięciem*], neighbours are just starting "the dance of fruit gathering" [*taniec owocobrania*] while the sun "lights bonfires on trees' masts" [*rozpala na masztach drzew ogniska*]. At the same time this oneiric image is interrupted by a sobering counter argument put forward by the sister and the father. The sister disciplines and reminds: "Don't squint your eyes. When you do that, it is obvious that you are a Jew" (55). [*Nie mruż tak oczu. Jak mrużysz oczy, zaraz poznać, że jesteś Żydówką*]. The father worries about survival: "if only we could save ourselves, if only they wouldn't kill us" (56) [*żebyśmy mogły się ratować, żeby nas nie zabili*]. Those rather rare moments of

being direct and frank can be easily justified in "The Garden that Floated Away". By confronting melancholic lyricism with the prosaic aspects of life Fink produces expressive and successful effect.

The story "The Threshold" is based on a similar contrast. Here, the reader deals with a heroine who wants to mentally run away from the horror of ongoing events. It occurs in July, 1941 after Germans entered the town and after the first massacre took place. There is no information about the victims so the massacre's aftermath is expressed by the condition of the house:

The gate, usually carefully closed, was now hanging on one hinge like a body of a man who fainted. The windows were closed tightly despite beautiful summertime. (19)

[*Furtka, zwykle starannie zamknięta, zwisała bezwładnie na jednym zawiasie, jak ciało mdlejącego człowieka, okna zaś były szczelnie pozamykane, mimo pięknej, letniej pory*].

The author uses trivial elements of the reality which are transformed into a symbol (Kuryłek 235). One of such symbols is a gate anthropomorphized in a martyr way, another one can be the threshold which the main heroine does not want to cross. She prefers to stay on the side of life, love and wonders of summertime than to take part in never-ending laments of aunts and uncles. The ultimate crossing of the threshold by the girl is also a metaphor. Forced by Germans to witness the death of a young Russian soldier and being tainted and hurt by the conflict, she can no longer ignore the war. She sits among her relatives and listens how "Goldman and his little son were killed" [*zabili Goldmana i jego małego synka*]. This psychological and ethical choice drags her into this condemned to death community. It is an entrance to the dark side, a way of reconciling with the fact that the sentence has already been passed.

Photographs and portraits

Portraits of the protagonists of the two longer stories – Eugenia and Julia are also of a poetic character, (stories: "Eugenia", "Julia"). Although, we get to know many things about them, this knowledge is still insufficient, and the narrator shares information in a way she considers to be appropriate. As a matter of fact, details and images recorded in a form of photography or memories seem to be the most important. They can be revived thanks to evocative and vivid descriptions, as in the first parts of "Eugenia". Syntax, especially the length of phrases, lack of verbs and gradual capture of stagnant landscape features – these elements emphasize stability in a photographic presentation of the bygone reality. Similes ("alley flat like a table", "nest-like hat") and metaphors ("a green cloud of branches", "sleepy river", "frozen in the heat") seem to be unsophisticated, close to everyday speech. That manoeuvre does not weaken their precision and power, though. Their accumulation and commonness stimulate imagination, create very appreciable images:

The alley on top of the Castle Hill, flat like a table. A green cloud of branches hangs over the alley, empty benches stand under the trees in the scorching sun and there are only the two of us in this, adored by all residents, alley – Eugenia and me. The parents have already disappeared behind the park's gate, it's only us and houses, gardens, a sleepy river and a stagnant grey pond at our feet. All frozen in the heat of the July sun. (193)

[*Aleja na szczycie Zamkowego Wzgórza, płaska jak stół. Nad aleją zielona chmura gałęzi drzew zamkowego parku, pod drzewami ławki puste o porze gorącego słońca i tylko my dwie w tej alei, ulubionej promenadzie mieszkańców miasteczka – Eugenia i ja, rodzice już znikli za bramą parku, tylko my dwie, a u naszych stóp domy i ogrody, senna rzeka i szary, nieruchomy staw. Wszystko zastygłe w upale lipcowego słońca*].

Photography initiates the work of memory, but memory likes surprising associations, shifts in time and space as well as digressions. That is why images change and overlap. Eugenia's dress (which was later given to the narrator) becomes a catalyst of such a swift transition. In fact, she was wearing her aunt's dress when she was taken to the labour camp, and this situation puts the images in motion:

I barely finished writing (or maybe it just wrote itself) when the Castle Hill disappeared for a few seconds. It was replaced by potato fields in grey, autumn mist and Ukrainian overseers who started to shout... but only for a few seconds because a minute later both of us emerged from the fog: Eugenia speeds up and doesn't look at me whatsoever; she stares at the stagnant pond in the distance. She wears her nest-like hat coquettishly askew. (195)

[Ledwo to napisałam (samo się napisało), aleja Zamkowego Wzgórza znikła sprzed oczu na kilka sekund, a na jej miejscu pojawiło się kartoflane pole w szarej, jesiennej mgle i odezwał się krzyk ukraińskich nadzorców... na kilka sekund tylko, bo oto już obie wyłaniamy się z mgły: Eugenia przyspiesza kroku i wcale na mnie nie patrzy, tylko na staw daleki, nieruchomy, a na jej głowie siedzi ukosem, zalotnie, czapeczka przypominające ptasie gniazdo].

Julia is portrayed with similar selection of details and similar calmness which also describe a pre-war portrayal and pre-war, summer atmosphere:

I remember Julia from the last days of August: she flows across a dusty market with her black, straw hat which she seems to use as a helm. She is still slim, wearing a sandy skirt and elbow-length gloves, full of chic and big-city style, walking with light step and shapely leg. (292)

[Pamiętam Julię z ostatnich dni sierpnia: płynie przez zakurzony rynek, sterując szeroką kreską czarnego, słomkowego kapelusza, jeszcze szczupła, w piaskowej spódnicy, w piaskowych po łokcie rękawiczkach, szykowna, wielkowiejska. Chód ma lekki, zgrabną nogę].

While organizing and looking for some coherence, the narrator's memory tries to fill in the gaps and coordinate events in time and space. These are the moments when the narrator seems to experience some flashes of inspiration and enlightenment, such as the following parenthetical remark where a person at whose place Julia stays, says: "Or: she heats up groats in the kitchen while Agafia stares at her with this forbidding look in her eyes since she doesn't like having intruders in her kingdom (so the crumbs must be from the first weeks because Agafia is still ruling in the kitchen, she hasn't been banned from reigning at Jews' yet)" (304). *[Albo: kaszę odgrzewa w kuchni, a Agafia patrzy na nią złym okiem, nie lubi intruzów w swoim królestwie (a więc to okruchy z pierwszych tygodni, bo Agafia króluje w kuchni, jeszcze nie zakazali jej królować u Żydów)].*

In the case of both characters "a draft of life history", as the author adds in the subtitles of "Eugenia" and "Julia", includes a longer time perspective, but naturally the Holocaust is the main event of both biographies. Tragic events reach the reader only in fragments through single scenes and images. That is why we can see a sudden glimmer of happiness and love in Eugenia's life during the darkest period of the Holocaust. Next, we can follow her with our eyes when she walks – supported by a loving man – with other people condemned to death after the final liquidation of the ghetto. The reader needs to guess the rest – what she felt, what she was thinking about, how she dealt with that time.

In the case of Julia the readers are also left with guesses and suppositions prepared by the narrator, who also witnessed these events, with a huge dose of intuition and empathy. Sometimes it is a laconic and masterfully reduced but at the same time evocative description of the heroine – such as Julia's reaction to Tulek's death: "In the evening she was lying numb in her bed, covered with a grey blanket. A lump of dirt" (305). *[Wieczorem leżała w łóżku bezwładna, okryta szarym kocem. Bryła ziemi].* The character is compared to a lump of dirt not only for visual reasons (shape, color) but also psychological ones – it represents numbing, excruciating pain after losing the son. The narrator's suggestions also trigger our emotional sensitivity when she tries to describe Julia, who has lost all her relatives, while she is looking at the photo hanging on the wall. In a heartbreaking but reserved way, this scene expresses, or even creates, a wide range of emotions – from pain and feeling of loneliness to becoming completely engrossed in memories of the lost family and times of happiness:

But what is she like behind the closed door in the evening? Szymon is looking at her from her bedroom walls; she is haunted by a lighthearted laugh of the boys who are standing on the bridge

in Z. Dawid is holding a book and Tulek – a ball. Under the bridge foaming water is swooshing merrily. (309)

[*Ale jaka jest wtedy, gdy wieczorem zamyka za sobą drzwi mieszkania? Ze ścian pokoju biegną za nią spojrzenia zwalistego Szymona i beztroski śmiech chłopców, którzy stoją na mostku w Z. Dawid trzyma w ręku książkę, Tulek piłkę. Pod mostkiem wesóło bełkoce spieniona woda*].

It is necessary for the reader to pay close attention to this scene – filled with meaningful brevity and detail. Through short and simple utterances (especially the two last sentences) containing only the most important elements, Fink managed to place some characteristic features of each person. She also portrayed the atmosphere in the picture – so dramatically different from Julia's current state of mind. She precisely described an idyllic location of the photographed group (a small bridge, down there "foaming water is swooshing merrily") and attributes associated with the times of safety, all of which gain symbolic meanings (a book, a ball). She froze that happy moment of a family – the time before the breakdown and destruction.

From behavioral perspective (Sokołowska 354) both Julia and Eugenia do not lose their psychological depth despite the fact that they are presented in a fragmentary way and based on memories deprived of any thorough examination.

Moving towards drama

The prose of Ida Fink contains not only poetic inclinations, though. Some stories, especially those full of dialogues or some kind of games or pretending, are close to dramas (Kiec 208). At the same time, they leave many issues unresolved and evocatively encourage the reader to guess and speculate. This is also characteristic for Ida Fink's actual dramas and radio dramas such as *Description of a Morning* or *Traces*. They show the characters in the state of tension and anxiety. This is what happens for instance in "A Conversation". In a single marital dialogue the author presented a heart of the problem and accumulated emotions experienced by the characters. This dynamic discussion is divided by descriptions of Anna's and Michał's appearance and reactions. Fink emphasizes the moments of their fiercest anger by capturing easy to overlook physiological reactions. The author focuses on very subtle gestures and body language of her characters. Describing these specific aspects of their behaviour turns out to be a main feature of her delicate prose, and which in turn would be difficult for actors to perform on stage. Fink wants to present moments in which her heroes happen to be in the most extreme states of anger. In Anna's case it is „silent, barely visible shivering” (86) [*ciche, ledwie dostrzegalne drżenie*], in Michał's case – „a rush of blood brought to the man's face has left it one tone paler” [*fala czerwieni, jaka przeszła przez twarz mężczyzny i pozostawiła ją o odcień bledszą*] as well as „heavy breath” (87) [*głośny oddech*].

In this way both techniques – prose and drama – complement each other functionally. By reducing the story to the most important issues, the author presented in "A Conversation" the complexity of a situation and its psychological consequences resulting from ambiguous relations between Anna, Michał and Emilia who is hiding them. Anna's oblique consent for an affair between her husband and a Polish woman means that the conflict between the need of closeness and exclusiveness and the will to survive has been resolved, although we do not know for how long. Both of them feel dispirited and ashamed. In her case it is not only caused by the fear and resignation from Michał but also by the feeling of her own pride and dignity. He, in turn, feels downhearted because of the fact that he was treated as an object in this conflict between the women, where Emilia holds all the cards.

Jews and Poles

"A Conversation" is one of those stories which confirms that Poles play many different roles in the works of Ida Fink – very often morally ambiguous, but their behavior never involves this immorality which we know from the latest historical studies (Gross, *Sąsiedzi; Strach; Żłote żniwa*; Engelking; Skibińska; Grabowski). On the contrary – they are often helpful, they hide Jews and help them to survive. At least this applies to some individuals such as Emilia from "A Conversation". In her case all doubts of ethical nature derive from a complex emotional situation. However, it looks differently in

"Aryan Papers". Here, 'sexual services' are already included in a price which a mature, Polish man expects from a sixteen-year-old Jewish girl.³ Is he kinder than a group of blackmailers who threaten her family? Taking into consideration all realities of the war, it is possible to judge him quite positively which even the heroine does as a form of self-consolation: „He is quite nice after all, and was always good to me while working. And he could turn me in...” (73) [*On jest nawet miły, zawsze był dobry dla mnie przy pracy, a mógł donieść...*]. Eventually it appears that the man kept his side of the bargain. Nevertheless, the whole situation must be extremely stressful and embarrassing since, as we may suppose, the girl has never experienced any physical love before. It is only the closing dialogue between the man and his business partner that reveals moral depravity and male brutality in this situation, right after the girl was sexually abused:

- So, who was that girl? – he asked entering the room.
- Well, just some whore.
- I thought she's a virgin – he looked surprised. – All pale, crying, shaky...
- And who says whores cannot be virgins?
- Look what a philosopher you are – the other one said and they both laughed. (74)
- [– *A co to za dziewczyna? – spytał, wchodząc do pokoju.*
- *A, taka kurwa.*
- *Myślałem, że dziewica – zdziwił się. – Błada, popłakana, chwiejna...*
- *Albo to dziewice nie mogą być kurwami?*
- *Filozof z ciebie – rzekł tamten i obaj się roześmieli*].

Polish people also act as a group observing the Jewish tragedy which according to Hilberg classifies them as bystanders (Hilberg).⁴ Emotions of the crowd are not completely clear. Fink does not have any insight into its mood or consolidated psyche (if it exists whatsoever). However, she points out to some reactions, most of which refer to the lack of understanding of ongoing events and unappreciation of how significant those events are. Fink proves her point through Aron's last words in a conversation between a few men in a station restaurant ("A Spring Morning"). As Anna Kuryłek rightly noticed: "Polish people are commenting on the events and putting them into some logical frames which are clear only for them; they are looking for explanations for an overheard paradox while they are still keeping out of discussion the fact of Jews actually leaving the city. Two worlds – Polish and Jewish – become alienated" (Kuryłek 225) [*Polacy komentują je, umieszczają w logicznych dla siebie kontekstach; szukają wyjaśnień zasłyszanego paradoksu i pozostawiają poza dyskusją sam fakt wyjścia Żydów z miasta. Dwa światy – polski i żydowski – wyalienowują się*]. In the story "The Pig" Fink describes a scene where Germans send Jews to death in packed lorries, but the observing crowd reacts with a fierce outrage only when a pig is run over by a car.

Conclusion – between suffering and form

It needs to be noted that Ida Fink has found an optimal way of combining categories which frequently stand in an opposition (not only with reference to the Holocaust): history and literature (Lang; White)⁵, ethics and aesthetics (Barańczak), suffering and form (Przybylski). She is aware of the necessity to join the truth with words, experience and art – this awareness can be noticed for instance

³ Aleksandra Ubertowska mentions *Aryan Papers* as one of the examples where "the issue of sexual abuse was transferred to fictional literature" (Ubertowska 31).

⁴ In the context of Hilberg's book and referring to Polish society during the times of war, Elżbieta Janicka and Tomasz Żukowski claim that it is necessary to change a safe status of "being a witness" of the Holocaust into the category of "being an inside participant observer". According to them, "the Holocaust left no place for being uninvolved". The authors point out to all, even the smallest, reactions which could expose Jews: whispers, looks, comments... (Janicka, Żukowski).

⁵ The stands of both researchers were presented and commented on by i.a. Katarzyna Chmielewska (21-32) and Bartłomiej Krupa (29-40). Jacek Leociak, in turn, referring to one of Bogdan Wojdowski's stories, argues that the author managed to create a form which is "a literary and historical discourse at the same time" (Leociak 459).

in the story "Zygmunt". Here Fink compares two interpretations of the same piece of music, the third concert of Beethoven, played by a diligent student "from the provinces". His first performance seems to prove the narrator's observation about Zygmunt's personality – the boy is hardworking but cold in nature and pedantic while his play, so technically correct, lacks "the heart". It is a different type of church – one which lacks the God, as Mickiewicz allegedly described the works of Słowacki.

His second performance occurs in different circumstances, and it can be compared with the first one in the same way one can compare two sermons of father Paneloux in *The Plague*. This time his music sounds dramatic and reminds a scream: "There was no coldness in his play, nothing artificial – that was a pure, spine-tingling music" (35) [*Nic oschłego nie było w tej grze, nic sztucznego – to była czysta, przejmująca do głębi serca muzyka*]. Two sides of boy's personality may remind two mythological artists from Herbert's poem, who take part in a musical duel: Marsyas and Apollo.⁶ Marsyas, lost and flayed, screams while Apollo – "the god with nerves of artificial fibers" [*bóg o nerwach z tworzyw sztucznych*], walks away along a beautiful alley after diligent tortures. Marsyas' wailing in pain turns a nightingale into stone and makes a tree turn grey-haired. Likewise, Zygmunt's suffering, who was cruelly and regularly battered by Germans (or maybe Ukrainian guards), makes him a trustworthy artist who expresses his torment, pain and fear through playing Beethoven – a German master of music.⁷ The range of emotions is so vast that the narrator's reaction is almost physiological: "I flinched and started to feel cold" (35) [*Wzdrygnęłam się, zrobiło mi się zimno*]. This is what happened to a nightingale and a tree from Herbert's poem and what appears to be the basis for Ida Fink's story.

However, there is a significant difference between the style of "Apollo and Marsyas" and aesthetics of Ida Fink's story. As we can imagine, she could have described the boy's body, extremely battered, full of bruises and wounds – Apollo in Herbert's poem spares no sight of Marsyas' entrails. But Fink draws a merciful curtain through which not much can be seen. Similarly to Herbert, she is aware that she will not be able to capture the human's pain through neither a scream nor cold and sophisticated aesthetics (Przybylski 98). This gesture presents the essence of her artistic approach and style – compassion, simplicity, calmness and discreet distance. She proves that ethics and aesthetics, suffering and form, experience and metaphor can intertwine into one moving and undying message. As a matter of fact: "authenticity cannot exist without literary quality since it is the only thing which sets conditions for authenticity, creates shattered narration and imposes at least a minimal form on shapeless experiences" (Czapliński 369) [*autentyzm nie może obyć się bez literackości, ponieważ tylko ona pozwala ustanowić warunki autentyczności, wytworzyć pogruchotaną narrację i nałożyć minimalną choćby formę na bezforemność doświadczenia*].

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⁶ In Herbert's poem Stanisław Burkot noticed a poetic manifestation of a dispute flared up by Julian Przyboś and Tadeusz Różewicz (Burkot).

⁷ With reference to Ryszard Przybylski's thoughts, Zygmunt's "scream" is not "an enemy of art"; it does not destroy "pure art" (Przybylski, 1998, p. 91, 95) because this boy somehow "performed" his scream with a necessity of emotional, individual complementation. His second performance prevails over the first one although the price that he paid is horrible. It is similar to Marsyas's case who truly defeated Apollo since the latter could not play on his lyre the same music as Silenus: "A sound which is made by tortured people before they die. A sound which makes the art of our century [that is the twentieth century – JW] impossible to exist" (Przybylski 96) [*Tonu wydawanego przez torturowanych tuż przed skoniem. Tonu, bez którego nie może istnieć sztuka naszego stulecia {XX w. – JW}*].

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