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## Survival strategy. *The Death Brigade* by Leon Weliczker

How one can model one's own emotional reactions to **attempt** to prevent the onrush of camp reality without losing contact with it (which almost always led to yielding to it, becoming consumed by it), is not an often raised issue. That gives even more reason for discussing the book entitled *The Death Brigade* – the recollections of Leon Weliczker describing his internment at the camp, and his time spent in the *Sonderkommando*.

### Weliczker

The author was 14 when WWII broke out. The biography he presented seems incredible. After the Germans entered Lviv, he was sent to prison several times, and each time he managed to escape. Twice, however, he returned to it voluntarily reporting instead of his father. While imprisoned, he was sentenced to execution by firing squad. When he was at the execution site (he dug a grave with other inmates), he escaped, returned home, and reached *the forest*. When he learnt about the deaths of his mother and four sisters, he penetrated the Lviv ghetto to find his father and brothers, from where – alone – he was sent to the Janowska camp, where for five months and five days he worked in the death brigade – he escaped it on 20 November 1943, and remained in hiding until July 1944. He did not stay in Lviv, though, as he moved to Gliwice<sup>1</sup> (he left Poland after the pogroms in 1946).<sup>2</sup>

An incredible story as it seems virtually impossible for someone to be so lucky (?), determined (?), and strong (?) to, against everything that was happening, risk

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<sup>1</sup> L. Weliczker, "Mój życiorys", in: *ibid*, *Brygada śmierci (Sonderkommando 1005). Pamiętnik*, Ośrodek „Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN”, Lublin 2012 (reprint of the 1946 edition), pp. 25–27.

<sup>2</sup> I am quoting this information after Arkadiusz Morawiec, the author of the introduction to the reprinted edition of Weliczker's book. Morawiec also further specified the situation of the "escape from the edge of the grave": the escape was "enabled" by one of the Germans, who recalled Weliczker for a moment to the camp. He managed to hide there, and only later escape from the camp. Vide A. Morawiec, "Wstęp", in: L. Weliczker, *Brygada śmierci...*, p. XIV.

so much, or even more so – to “invite” dangerous circumstances (I am particularly referring to the reporting to the prison in place of his father). Auerbach wrote that “the ability to cope with difficult and dangerous circumstances had a high presence in his case”. At the same time he emphasised that: “He did not give up on his life, he did not give into the fatalism of gravitating towards the extermination to which so many Jews submitted somnambulicly. He tried to rescue himself, and good luck favoured him”.<sup>3</sup> Those words offered almost immediately after the original was written sound ambiguous today: after so many years which have brought new insights into actual opportunities for saving oneself from Shoah, or rather the lack thereof, to think about *submitting* is extremely hard, yet one cannot forget that the author wrote about the act’s sleep-like nature (as if the Jews subject to extermination ceased to be themselves, as if they let themselves be put into a state shattering any understanding). Auerbach’s assessment indicates – somewhat intuitively as not everything was known back then – the problem of the non-existence of the awareness of what was happening, of the inability to properly understand one’s situation, which led to submitting to current events. At this point, it needs to be stressed that the Jews who believed they were travelling for work, who believed that the oppressor “was not lying”, were not necessarily doing that with complete awareness. It was usually caused by their defence mechanisms, which ousted from one’s view information which would cause too big a burden on one’s mind.

In that sense, it seems inadequate to juxtapose Weliczker with the “Jews submitting to extermination somnambulicly”: the author of *The Death Brigade* did not even have the opportunity to spin any dreams: not only did he closely escape death in prison, but if that was not enough, he was sent to a place where he was an eyewitness to the extent of the crime committed by the Germans, and he had to participate in covering it up.

Weliczker’s young age, and his physical strength were those characteristics which benefited him. At the same time, though, his young age entailed his defencelessness against everything that he saw and experienced. When editing his notes, Auerbach wrote that she removed from them before being released fragments indicating the author’s naivety (mainly regarding the feelings towards his murdered family, and the descriptions of his compassion for the victims), leaving only some “in their original helpless form to indicate the noble moral attitude of the young Jew, offering the most valuable heritage, and his property saved from extermination”.<sup>4</sup>

I wish to point out that *naivety*, significant particularly in combination with the knowledge of what Weliczker had to see and do. The above remark by the text’s editor could be considered as proof of the inclusion of *The Death Brigade* within the “martyrological” approach – the quotation mark that I used marks the

<sup>3</sup> R. Auerbach, “Uwagi wstępne” [English version translated from Polish], in: L. Weliczker, *Brygada śmierci...*, p. 13. [English version: Weliczker L. *The Janowska Road*. New York 2014]

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

distance towards the possibility of viewing the memories from the *Sonderkommando* as lofty. And yet the words about passing that place with a “constructive moral attitude” do not seem to contradict that. In order to study the modes of approaching that paradox further, I propose to consider the issue of the emotional attitude of the author of the book to the experiences he described.

### The camp – “do not think”

We look into the ravine. It contains an open mass grave with thousands of bodies visible to us. On the side of the hill are large piles of wooden logs. [...] The machine pumps oil [...] The fire is hissing. Perhaps the burning bodies are hissing? Perhaps they burn these people alive? In a few minutes I shall know.

“Don’t be afraid”, the Untersturmführer begins his speech. “You will work here, and when the work is finished you will go back to camp”.

We listened to him with mistrust. We know these speeches by now. Weren’t all those who were sent to their death going for “work”? [...]

Because I am the tallest in the group, the Germans chose me first and then selected two others. [...] we volunteers are led to the working place, leaving the others behind us. Nothing could be worse than this! How much worse can it get, as the worst is already happening? Maybe that’s why he chose only three, so that there remains a neat number of 40, which he will lead into the fire? What’s the point in thinking? Now it will be impossible to escape.<sup>5</sup>

The above fragment presents the first encounter with the place of “work” of the death brigade, indicating Weliczker’s reporting style, though emphatically broken with his personal remarks resembling scraps of his internal monologue. The author was consistent in presenting the gradual accumulation of details, confronting them with the stories circulating around the camp, and, finally, his “gallop of thoughts”. That is supposed to be restrained by the calming words “do not think” – and those are not just a rhetorical insert. That which appears before a reader’s eyes, is a replayed scene of experiencing something which exceeds anything imaginable. The calmness referenced by the author of the notes had two meanings: on the one hand, it was an attempt to muffle the onrush of feelings, emotional stimulation which could be further amplified by a rapid flow of thoughts, thus resulting in increasing confusion (which would constitute a deadly threat), and, on the other, calmness, perceived as external composure, would give the impression of a strong distancing, or a certain unemotionality.

When analysing Weliczker’s account from today’s perspective, one realises that he presented his reactions to an event causing severe mental trauma: not only did he see piles of murdered people, but he also realised that he himself could die at any moment. The offered description is a record of what we may refer to as “experienced trauma”: in that context, the quoted words directed at oneself – “do

<sup>5</sup> L. Weliczker, *Brygada śmierci...*, pp. 36–37.

not think” – indicate the primary, almost instinctive manner of “coping” with that which was happening. By applying the notions of contemporary psychology, one could define them as an attempt at influencing one’s own emotional reactions so that they do not lead to an increased sense of terror (and, in turn, an increase of the suffering being experienced).

### Regulation of emotions

The issue of the regulation of emotions is one of the basic issues of contemporary psychology. It indicates the relationship between emotional reactions and the requirements of the environment, enabling research into the cultural and social conditions of expressing emotions.<sup>6</sup> Emphasising the community-based aspect of regulating emotions does not entail, however, that psychologists omit individual conditions of those types of reactions, though they indicate that they are not divergent enough to disable their recognition by other people.<sup>7</sup> Most often, though, those differences in people’s reactions result from negative experiences,<sup>8</sup> while the basic causes triggering a distorted course of emotions include traumatic events. A control of emotions may lead to muffling or suppressing them so that one could defend oneself against an excessively difficult experience or to attenuate the influence of an event which cannot be accepted by one’s mind. Trauma studies have shown that one of the reactions to traumatic events is dissociation, which consists of “a variation in normal consciousness that arises from reduced or altered access to one’s thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and/or memories”.<sup>9</sup> That type of withdrawal, disassociation from one’s own thoughts, occurs in the quoted fragment of *The Death Brigade*.

It must be stressed that the definition mentioned above applies to situations once the traumatic event has concluded, and I mentioned it in this context for two reasons: firstly, one cannot exclude the fact that in the case of a particularly menacing situation, the process of suppressing emotions appears immediately

<sup>6</sup> Vide Łosiak, *Psychologia emocji*, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warsaw 2007, p. 141–164.

<sup>7</sup> J.R. Averill, “Nieodpowiednie i odpowiednie emocje”, in: *Natura emocji. Podstawowe zagadnienia*, P. Ekman, R.J. Davidson (eds.), trans. B. Wojciszke, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2002, p. 230. [English version: P. Ekman, R.J. Davidson. *The Nature of Emotions*. Oxford 1994]

<sup>8</sup> As Averill posited: As a result of (or in compensation for) physiological dysfunction, inadequate socialization, motivational distortion, and cognitive biases, a person may develop rules that depart significantly from the constructive rules [for expressing a specific emotion – note B.P.] prescribed by society. Such personal (as opposed to social or shared) rules of emotion allow the expression of needs and desires, but in a highly idiosyncratic and often «disordered» fashion”. Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> J. Briere, C. Scott, *Podstawy terapii traumy. Diagnoza i metody terapeutyczne*, trans. P. Nowak, Instytut Psychologii Zdrowia. Polskie Towarzystwo Psychologiczne, Warsaw 2010, p. 40. [English version: J. Briere, C. Scott. *Principles of Trauma Therapy*. London 2015]

(because the experience is so strong that the defence mechanism starts to operate immediately), and secondly, Weliczker's account was partly created after his work in the *Sonderkommando* – thus it could be considered as created both during and after the existence of the threat. Even though in relation to a traumatic experience one might define a clear line dividing the time of the direct influence of an event and a later time, one cannot assume that throughout that period trauma persisted (it only passed through various stages).

Weliczker's "do not think", trying to help him divert the realisation of possible death, evokes an image of a person retaining their composure, intending not to yield to terror. When describing the internees who survived, Rachela Auerbach noted: "those people display an ability to exact the most acute accommodation of their affects, an ability to avoid anything that could result in the so-called mental breakdown".<sup>10</sup> That ability to avoid difficult situations is expressed directly in Weliczker's account when he tells the story of a man ("one Brill"), who immediately upon being transported to the camp was separated from his daughters, and was sent to the kommando: on the same day he saw their corpses (he worked on burning the dead bodies). When telling that story, Weliczker focussed on the manner in which it was told: "He talks very slowly and haltingly – as if he were convincing himself that he, Brill, still existed. After each word he sighed «Oi». Often, in the middle of a sentence his voice trails off and he heaves a deep «Oi»".<sup>11</sup> Notice the emotionless quoting by the author of *The Death Brigade* of the description of the father's encounter with his murdered daughters, whose bodies he soon saw in flames – Weliczker offered a perfect description of a person in shock. The difficulty in speaking indicated both a state of confusion, and reflected the growing pain associated with the returning of the sight of the young women. A comment by a listener to the story is rather apt: Brill could experience the sensation, as presumed by Weliczker, of falling apart, the trauma he experienced literally shocked him making him unable to defend himself. Carefully observing his fellow internee, the author of the account concludes at some point, though: "He was saying something more, moaning, gesturing with his hands and feet, like an insane person. But I didn't listen any more. How could I help him?"<sup>12</sup>

The impression of "heartlessness" which readers will have at that point is a result of applying both extra-camp norms to a situation which exceeds understanding, and insufficient knowledge of the processes which occur when coming into contact with a person's suffering.<sup>13</sup> One should remember that Weliczker was

<sup>10</sup> R. Auerbach, "Uwagi wstępne", p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> L. Weliczker, *Brygada śmierci...*, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> Trauma researchers have indicated the phenomenon of the so-called vicarious trauma, which affects mainly people bringing broadly considered help to those affected by traumatic events. It does apply to rescue personnel and psychotherapists, but the mechanism of how trauma is created through co-experiencing someone else's experiences may also be applied to approximating the situation

a keen observer, and his brief interjection indicates that he suspected what was going on with his interviewee: one could not possibly accuse him of a lack of sensitivity. One could, however, say that it was the contrary: when imagining what the father of the murdered daughters felt (the feeling of falling apart), he kept his distance towards him. Not because he did not want to help him. Rather because he knew he was not able to do anything for him, he severed himself from the story he heard so that he would not experience it himself, not to burden himself with it.

The further description of the evening and the night after the talk with Brill offer an important context for the above discussion. Upon leaving the despairing man to isolate himself, after some time Weliczker walks up to him, and tries to talk to him about an escape. The thought appears from time to time in the account, which indicates the need to strengthen his own resistance, and extend the distance separating him from the surrounding reality (as if he was thus building a safety zone). Upon hearing from Brill that for him nothing matters any more, that he wants to die, he comments as follows: “now that man is not alive, he has lost his soul”.<sup>14</sup> The words referring to his condition after the deaths of his daughters also emphasise the resulting numbing, a collapse into oneself, which threatens one’s life. At the same time, the words indicate what was important for Weliczker: to survive, he had to try to retain in himself that which would help save him.

The quoted conversation, in which by changing the topic the author of the account wanted to stop sinking in co-suffering, and start planning that which could help them save themselves together, suggests that he constantly tried to stop the onrush of the reality that surrounded him. While continuing to prevent – as was stressed by the editor of his book – himself from breaking down, he always sought methods of weakening or blocking the emerging emotions. Their strength, and how emphatic their presence in his mind was were indicated by the dreams he had the night after that conversation.

Weliczker wrote that he dreamt of a holiday supper, which he attended with his entire family (he was its only surviving member) – he was awoken from those images by the sound of a child’s cry coming from nearby (“waiting for liberation in the form of death”,<sup>15</sup> he added). When he fell asleep once more, he saw his youngest brother crying in fear before his impending end – Weliczker tried to calm him down by saying that death lasts only a moment, and then he would join his parents. That dream image was followed by another, as he stressed, originating from reality:

A mother has been shot, and the child sits by her in a puddle of blood, with its head on her breast sleeping. As SS man wakes the child by whipping her. She must go with the other children

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of persons who remain in conditions in which the amount of traumatic information received, and the fact of witnessing such events exceeds the training of even those who belong to rescue forces (the camp experience was one). Vide J. Briere, C. Scott, *Podstawy terapii traumy...*, p. 24. Psychologists have often warned against such co-experiencing.

<sup>14</sup> L. Weliczker, *Brygada śmierci...*, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

to the “Sands”. The child screams in terror: “Mother, it hurts!” The child gets up and starts to run, and the SS man goes after her. The child yells, and the murderer decides to shoot her on the spot. He reaches for his pistol, and shoots. The shot wakes me up. Later, we learnt the story.<sup>16</sup>

A dream interrupted by a noise which is both dreamt and actual belongs to the examples analysed by psychologists of processing experienced events and situations during the day. In Weliczker’s case, the dream stopped with both an imaginary and an actual shot reminding him of his inability to escape reality. And the point was not to offer a striking conclusion: the dreams presented by the author of the account indicate the power of the emotions he experienced, which – though suppressed during the day – re-emerged at night with all the events and feelings that evoked them.

The dreams which were described applied to the relationships between children and parents or siblings, and all those could be viewed in the context of the conversation with Brill heard that day. They would indicate (as a type of an analogy) how strong an effect his story had on Weliczker (and, in turn, against what he was defending himself).

In fact, post-traumatic reactions include dream visions in which painful situations re-emerge,<sup>17</sup> yet it would be difficult not to notice that in the discussed fragments – also forming when directly experiencing shocking events – nightmarish images appear immediately, and, moreover, they are almost verbatim repetitions of the events experienced consciously. As if they were stressing everything from which the person experiencing the trauma tried to escape, revealing that which during the day is ousted from one’s consciousness.

The above-quoted fragments indicate intimately the methods Weliczker, while operating in the *Sonderkommando*, applied trying to deflect all the information and events which could lead to his breakdown. The construction of that protective barrier surely appeared in the case of at least some members of the kommando. Those who did not try to defend themselves literally died by their own hands. Weliczker described a suicide which occurred at the beginning of his internment. It was confirmed by other sources – Krystyna Żywulska’s interviewee said: “if you don’t go crazy the first day... you can get used to it later on”.<sup>18</sup> When describing such situations, Gideon Greif stressed:

The initial shock was for the majority of the new internees included in the *Sonderkommando* an experience so traumatic that they fell into complete apathy. That indifference ought to be defined as a defence mechanism, which could have been for those people, as they stood in front of piles of corpses, the only way to retain sanity, and to survive.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> J. Briere, C. Scott, *Podstawy terapii traumy...*, p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> K. Żywulska, *Przeżyłam Oświęcim*, tCHu, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz–Birkenau, Warsaw–Oświęcim 2008, p. 221.

<sup>19</sup> G. Greif, “...*plakaliśmy bez łez...*”. *Relacje byłych więźniów żydowskiego Sonderkommando z Auschwitz*, trans. J. Kapłon, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz–Birkenau, Warsaw–Oświęcim 2007, p. 83.

In the above-mentioned situations (both the one of the self-imposed “not thinking”, and the distancing himself from the story of the father of murdered daughters), Weliczker himself indicated the need to *exclude* himself from reality, thus clearly stressing that he realised the protective aspect of such behaviour. Even if that was knowledge on the edge of his awareness, which in the case of defence mechanisms is often a rule, it was a fact that the author of the account applied towards himself specific rules enabling him to prevent any more suffering. Yet the oppressors also used such actions, the goal of which was to *stupefy* the internees. In that case, however, the goal was to evoke a certain apathetic condition which would make them work without rebelling. The methods leading to the condition also differed.

### Manipulating emotions

Weliczker often indicated the fact that SS men stressed the need to pretend in front of the internees that everything that was happening was not actually happening, and not to reveal how the events influenced their minds. The fact that the need to conceal the process of extermination also covered the internees forced to participate in it is not surprising, but what is baffling is the Germans’ attempt to influence the consciousness, and the emotions of the members of the kommando.

The internees first learnt that they should pretend contentment in front of SS men from the Schupos:<sup>20</sup> “They advise us to look happy, satisfied with our work; otherwise we shall be shot”.<sup>21</sup> That also offered a suggestion which was based on the conviction of the need to pretend emotions (though not contradicting them). The Germans responsible for the act of murdering had a different attitude towards that:

They carried the corpses to the fire. [...] On the other side of the fire the tabulator was standing. He held a piece of paper and a pencil in his hands. His task was to keep count of how many bodies were burnt each day. This is a top-secret job. It is forbidden to tell even the Schupos how many are burnt each day. In the evening the tabulator reports the exact number to the Untersturmführer. Even the tabulator must forget the amount after he reports to the Untersturmführer, my neighbour tells me. When the Untersturmführer asks him the next day “How many bodies were burnt yesterday?” the tabulator must answer “I don’t know”. The corpses are called “figures” here, my neighbour continues. To toss in the bodies one has practically to go into the fire oneself. Those on this job have their hands, face, and hair singed.<sup>22</sup>

The natural (in the case of processes entailing secrecy) ban on propagating any information is extended to include the nonsensical, as it may seem at first, ban on remembering. And even though no one can order anyone to “stop remembering”,

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<sup>20</sup> Schupos, according to Weliczker, were not professional policemen, rather German reservists – forced to join the service, who did not participate personally in murdering Jews. Vide L. Weliczker, *Brygada śmierci...*, p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.

the fact of exerting that type of pressure on one's mind is a manipulation device intended to evoke a sense of confusion: those forced to fulfil absurd orders are supposed to doubt their own ability to identify their surroundings (the actual result – unverifiable – is not important; what matters is the constant pressure on the internees). The fact of undermining one's belief in their own reactions had also a broader, and "subtler" scope:

As after the previous executions, so today, Untersturmführer Scherlack came to see how we "looked". Maybe we are not too "happy", and another execution will be needed. [...] He continues to walk slowly, looking into everyone's eyes, as if trying to read our minds. Quickly, everyone dons a smiling face. [...] Now the Untersturmführer slowly moves a few steps forward, still looking at and studying each of us; he stops at one inmate he thinks does not look as "happy" as he should. He says that he can see from his facial expression that the inmate is not satisfied. He absolutely wants to hear the truth. The inmate starts to excuse himself, says that he always seems serious when he looks anyone in the eyes. The Untersturmführer complains, shaking his head, states that we are all lying to him.<sup>23</sup>

That scene could be interpreted as an attempt to impose a required reaction on the internees: they were supposed to not only look terrified or indifferent, but also give the impression of approval. In that case, one should note the process of forcing not only an apparent change, but the oppressors' attempt at influencing the minds of the internees. By forcing them to uphold a certain facial expression, they evoked the need to express emotions different from those felt, which often resulted in additional suffering. Weliczker mentioned that in a description of the marching out for work, during which the internees were forced to sing: "The heart cries, while the lips sing".<sup>24</sup>

The inability to express one's emotions often leads to suppressing them, yet they may also be replaced with desired experiences in such a way to limit the sense of discomfort between one's own perceptions and that which is to be revealed.

### **Control of emotions and trauma**

The conscious decision to keep some images and thoughts away from himself could have been supported by the automatic reflex to withdraw from engaging in the entire reality and vice versa: the defensive reactions triggered could have been amplified by the control of emotional experiences. Weliczker's indication of his feelings did not, obviously, exclude the fact that some of them remained outside of his consciousness. The previously mentioned dissociation phenomenon (limiting access to own thoughts, feelings, memories) is treated by some psychologists as a type of experience which is supposed to lead to "psychological avoidance

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

of emotional suffering”.<sup>25</sup> Dissociation itself (possessing a specifically defensive dimension, often triggered unwittingly) may also appear along with other, not considered as traumatic, events,<sup>26</sup> so it has a much more general nature. At the same time, the emotional self-control applied by the author of *The Death Brigade* helped him specifically to protect himself against increased suffering. Therefore, both modes of operation – the rarely realised process of emotional “self-exclusion”, and the realised mode of regulating or mitigating one’s feelings – serve to protect oneself from excessive mental strain. Moreover, as has been emphasised in trauma research, its course always depends on individual factors, one of which (apart from such conditions as age, sex, social status, previous experiences, personality type, etc.) is the manner of emotional experiencing of trauma itself:

Although sometimes considered a traumatic characteristic [...], peritraumatic distress (and peritraumatic dissociation) is probably as much a victim variable as it is an index of trauma severity. Those who experience especially high levels of distress at the time of a trauma would seemingly be more at risk of posttraumatic difficulties for a number of reasons, including pre-existing problems in stress tolerance and affect regulation, prior trauma exposure, and a cognitive predisposition to view life events as outside of their control or as potential threats.<sup>27</sup>

What is noteworthy is the conditional mood present in the quoted fragment of the discussion by the authors of *The Principles of Trauma Therapy*: when analysing the individual dimension of a traumatic experience, one cannot introduce any generalising conclusions. Each case, quite obviously, is considered independently, while the identified similarity of some of the reactions should not determine the possibility of constructing a model.

What remains important, though, is the focus on the very possibility for the existence of a relationship between personal methods of emotional reacting to and experiencing trauma: yet it does not mean a unilateral relationship (one could not possibly state that a person who copes well with “regulating affect” can weaken the influence of trauma; one could only conclude that it cannot be rejected, that one could consider it when examining the person). If one refers the above remarks to Weliczker’s account, one could conclude that apart from a possible existence of mechanisms automatically weakening the influence of the camp reality that surrounded him, he himself tried to behave in a manner supporting his protection against even higher suffering.

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My analyses of the modes of conduct of the members of the *Sonderkommando* indicate that apart from automatic defence mechanisms, they triggered (more or less intentionally) various processes enabling them to prevent any increase of

<sup>25</sup> J. Briere, C. Scott, *Podstawy terapii traumy...*, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

their own suffering so that they could live. On the one hand, they were among those internees who, based on their physique (meaning both health, and nutrition and sleeping), had, in general, more strength to evoke in themselves mental strength. Yet, on the other, everything they experienced was so traumatic that their functioning usually led to their destroying themselves: and I do not mean only committing suicide. One of Weliczker's remarks that the murdered were better off than they was not only a "rationalisation" of jokes about corpses; it revealed the truth about people forced to destroy themselves with their own hands. Both unrealised and intentional defence mechanisms, despite ensuring survival (at least for some time), led, however, to undermining one's sense of identity. The fact that at the same time the Germans provoked situations where internees were forced to sever themselves from what they felt, could have increased their sense of guilt, which was yet another element of the oppressors' abuse: if SS men forced them into actions which they themselves used, it could lead to self-accusation, also existing on the edge of one's awareness (of intentional "self-desensitisation" towards that which was happening, towards the fact of being a witness to extermination). The manipulation thus exacted by the oppressors would be based on a shockingly simple yet terrifying idea: that which is sometimes used as a defence mechanism, becomes an order, thus destroying both the sense of one's own autonomy (which was the general assumption of a fascist totalitarianism), and the sense of being in contact with reality and oneself based on the access to one's own emotions.

Also when the internees in the *Sonderkommando* forced to operate the ongoing extermination tried to protect themselves, they fulfilled (to some extent at least) the directions of their tormentors: by becoming indifferent in order to live, they functioned on the edge of reality – without experiencing it. Those who survived when they returned many years later to that period, and said that they lived like animals, not only revealed the process of their own depersonalisation, but also indicated how they perceived themselves outside of social reality. Upon being provoked to "inhuman" (in the common meaning of the word) behaviour, having adjusted their own *I* to it, they found themselves not only outside the *human* but also the camp worlds, which was a huge success for the Germans.

One must note, though, that they also had to take into account the thus produced gap within the Lager order, as reflected upon by one of the internees Abraham Dragon: "SS men feared the *Sonderkommando* internees, we were «outside the law»".<sup>28</sup> In his mind, they reacted in such a way because the internees, having nothing to lose (as they could die at any moment), were sometimes perceived as a real threat to the Germans. But it is difficult to conclude whether that was only a concern for one's own life, or whether there existed a fear of people marked by such work. Even more so as such a fear could have existed on the edge of one's consciousness.

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<sup>28</sup> A. and S. Dragon, "W zwątpieniu i nadziei – zawsze byliśmy razem!", in: G. Greif, "... płakaliśmy bez łez...", p. 131.

As I mentioned when I quoted a fragment of Krystyna Żywulska's book, the internees avoided the members of the *Sonderkommando*. The author of *Przeżyłam Oświęcim* wrote that when she saw them, she saw "monsters", and she could not have imagined people could work like that. Weliczker also described how people reacted when they appeared in the camp; in doing so he revealed that "other point of view", i.e. their reception of the behaviour of their fellow internees:

The inmates in the camp, seeing us march in their direction, run into their barracks. We feel hurt that everyone is afraid of the mere sight of us. We don't look so awful. On the other hand, the two fire tenders, with their horned hats and their hooks in their hands, could scare anyone.<sup>29</sup>

The justification of the reaction in the presence of the "devils" could indicate some "ignorance" on Weliczker's part, yet I would refrain from explaining that instance with the youthful naivety indicated by the editor of his account.<sup>30</sup> What seems much more important to me in this case is the involuntary revealing of his mental rejection of that to which the internees were forced: it would have been a sign of the mentioned control of emotions, as well as the application of defence mechanisms which, by limiting one's experiences, prevented them from realising how the situation being experienced could had been read by others.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> L. Weliczker, *Brygada śmierci...*, p. 89.

<sup>30</sup> Vide R. Auerbach, "Uwagi wstępne", p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> At this point, the words of Leon Cohen seem worth quoting: "When we rejected those feelings, we felt like «normal people», we treated all that as a «job» which we had to perform according to the Germans' directions." L. Cohen, "Nie byliśmy już ludźmi, byliśmy robotami", in: G. Greif, "...plakaliśmy bez łez...", p. 324. Yet it would be impossible not to refer to the already mentioned Żywulska's interview with an internee included in the kommando, who tried to explain to her their situation – so he might have realised how they could had been assessed from the outside.

**Survival strategy. *The Death Brigade* by Leon Weliczker**

(Summary)

The article discusses the account by Leon Weliczker (*The Death Brigade*) who belonged to the Sonderkommando in the Janowska camp. When describing everyday life centring on the removal of corpses, Weliczker also revealed his own methods for survival. Trauma discourse focusses on trauma's later influence, in the case of the analysed text that applies to an attempt at recording a continuing traumatic state. In applying the psychological context, the author indicates how Weliczker tried to minimise the influence of trauma by utilising various mechanisms for controlling and suppressing emotions.

**Key words:** Extermination; Janowska camp, Sonderkommando; trauma, control of emotions