

## Women's Luxury Items in Concentration Camps

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Considering that patriarchal tradition placed in the center man and (his) intellectual life, even the experiences of German Nazi concentration and extermination camps have been viewed and described largely through intellectual (male) categories.<sup>1</sup> And therein lies the paradox and the problem of post-Nazi culture, namely the influence that discourses characteristic of the "high," patriarchal cultural elites have had on the way in which life in the camps has been described. Moreover, the literary language (used in many autobiographical accounts of the camps) is the language of those whom the system of power places in a privileged position.<sup>2</sup> As such it carries within itself traditional values and allows naming objects, situations and those who are viewed as "others" according to the interest of the privileged group. In terms of the camps it allowed for example to use the term "hospital" for a place which had little to do with health care except symbolically.<sup>3</sup> Such

<sup>1</sup> See: Susan Bordo, "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought," *Signs* 11, no. 3 (Spring 1986): 439-456; and Somer Brodribb, *Nothing Ma(t)ters: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism* (Melbourne: Spinfex Press, 1992), xv-xxx.

<sup>2</sup> See: Joan Wallach Scott, "On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 31 (Spring 1987), 1-13.

<sup>3</sup> See: Stanisław Grzesiuk, *Pięć lat kacetu*, 7th ed. (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1972); Bożena Karwowska, *Ciało, seksualność, obozy zagłady* (Kraków: Universitas, 2009).

language is above all else an instrument of power, it enables the manipulation of reality. Viewing camp literature from this perspective, it is easier to understand how serious a problem was the fact that the originators and (to some extent) perpetrators of the Holocaust were members or followers of the patriarchal cultural elite. Making use of a language and of categories that originated outside the system which, while it was not perhaps directly responsible for the Holocaust, did not stand up against it, enable one to grasp issues which it is otherwise difficult to name and describe.<sup>4</sup>

The two main terms used in this writing – luxury and gender – are seldom discussed in the context of the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup> Concentration and extermination camps, together with prisons and POW camps, are hardly ever connected with the word "luxury." Though luxury comes in many forms, it is increasingly hard to define and the criteria are hardly scientific; regardless of the definition, the concept is applied to the world of people who enjoy many sides of freedom.<sup>6</sup> A close reading of memoirs of the survivors of the German Nazi concentration camps, however, reveals that both luxury and gender can provide an interesting lens for looking at the realm of the camps.

In their memoirs of the camps former prisoners recorded, though usually unconsciously, that people were directed to camps for men or women not on the basis of their gender or sex, but their bodies seen as feminine or masculine. However, a Polish writer and

<sup>4</sup> See: Susan Bordo, "'Maleness' Revisited," *Hypatia* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1992), 197-207; and Judith Butler, "Response to Bordo's 'Feminist Skepticism and the 'Maleness' of Philosophy,'" *Hypatia* 7, no. 3 (Summer, 1992), 162-165.

<sup>5</sup> See: Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (Dec. 1986): 1053-1075; Jane S. Upin, "Applying the Concept of Gender: Unsettled Questions," *Hypatia* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1992), 180-187.

<sup>6</sup> See: Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999); John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1977).

Auschwitz survivor Seweryna Szmaglewska noted in her memoirs *Dymy nad Birkenau* [Smoke over Birkenau] that with time the prisoners' bodies were losing their sexual characteristics and were becoming "childish."<sup>7</sup> One would not distinguish between female and male body, especially from a distance. And while the perpetrator did not see the prisoner as a man or a woman (the gesture frequently repeated by prisoners themselves), and thus denied them their humanity, the prisoners who could not rely on the bodily differences had to cling to their gender with its culturally imposed characteristics, in order to preserve their humanity.<sup>8</sup>

An interesting critical approach which helps to understand the situation presented by Szmaglewska (who witnessed and recorded the extermination of Hungarian Jews in Auschwitz) and other authors of camp memoirs, is provided by feminist criticism dealing with "captive" African Americans (slaves).<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, imprisonment in the camp can be viewed as "theft of the body," that is "a willful and violent...severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire." One of the consequences of such theft is the blurring of gender difference since the bodies of both women and men "become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific."<sup>10</sup> At the same time – from the point of view of the "captives" – the body is a private space (often being the only kind of privacy there is) which, however, the "owners" transform into an object. According to Hortense J. Spillers, in this situation, "the captured sexualities

<sup>7</sup> Seweryna Szmaglewska, *Dymy nad Birkenau*, 7th ed. (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1963). All quotations are in my translation, B.K.

<sup>8</sup> See: Karwowska, *Ciało, seksualność, obozy zagłady*, 61-81.

<sup>9</sup> The word "captives" is used here both to underscore analogies with prisoners and slaves as well as to avoid identifying them exclusively with these two groups.

<sup>10</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 386.

provide a physical and biological expression of 'otherness.'"<sup>11</sup> All this is occurring in a situation in which the "captives" (in this case camp prisoners) are deprived of their "normal" (patriarchal) social roles – their position in the family ceases to determine their place in the world in which they function. Instead they have to function in a world whose rules are totally alien to them, and sometimes incomprehensible. Their bodies become objects and their value is determined by a system hostile to the captive, so that, placed in such a system, the captive loses both identity and personality. Spillers further argues that to prevent this process captives try to preserve traces of familiar social functions, including gender difference and gender specific social roles and models.

The physical separation of sexes, and degradation of the body-made sexuality (and in fact the category of sex) is of limited use in the concentration camps.<sup>12</sup> However, even though Spillers notices that the captives "lose at least *gender difference in the outcome*," she also sees the captive body as focusing "a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join."<sup>13</sup> By the same token, the body becomes the territory in which sex and gender become indistinguishable and inseparable.<sup>14</sup> For the people coming to Auschwitz, it was the state of the body that conditioned their fate in the camp – the young and healthy had a chance to survive when those with old and sickly appearances were selected to die immediately. The process of "selection" for the immediate extermination was repeated in the camp from time to time, and it was the state (or appearance) of the body that was used as criteria. One may argue, however, that gender also played a role during the selection, since mothers

<sup>11</sup> Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 386.

<sup>12</sup> See: Karwowska, *Ciało, seksualność, obozy zagłady*, 74-78.

<sup>13</sup> Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 385.

<sup>14</sup> See: Toril Moi, "What Is a Woman? Sex, Gender, and the Body in Feminist Theory," in *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3-120.

of young children were exterminated immediately regardless of the state of their bodies.

In fact memoirs of many survivors reveal their authors' inability to separate both spheres (biological and symbolic). One may even argue that the biological difference between sexes, or the binary sexual character of humans, is in many memoirs almost forgotten. It looks like their authors' view on the human body in the concentration camps comes from the pre-18th century thinking in terms of one sex (all male parts of the body are duplicated in females not as completing each other but rather establishing a hierarchical order).<sup>15</sup> It was then the gender, not the sex/body that was creating a binary opposition of male and female, and thus defined humans. Prisoners in the camps were deprived of their "primary" biological sexual function of reproduction; they differed only in gender roles. In this situation the ability to perform gender reflected on prisoners "humanity." The situation thus reinforced the importance of hierarchically seen culturally imposed differences between male and female, categorizing them into two distinct genders. Especially important in this context is replacing the sexual characteristics of the (sexed) body by gendered behaviors, gestures, and objects.

Not always fully aware of their fate, Jews transported to the death camps were following the Nazi instructions and brought with them the most precious possessions, maybe also believing that luxury objects can help them to save their lives or make them more comfortable. Deprived of their valuables right on the ramp, they were, with some exceptions, sent directly to gas chambers, while their belongings were collected, sorted, and stored in the camps. The majority of objects acquired in this way was sent to the Reich, but some items were used in the camps by the administration, and some were stolen (or "organized") by prisoners and circulated on the camps' black markets.

In their memoirs many survivors write that the life of prisoners in concentration camps was much worse than that of those

<sup>15</sup> See: Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

imprisoned in death camps, as in the latter the black market of goods brought by so called "transports" was a source of additional food and clothing, usually of high quality, luxurious items. What is especially interesting, the value of luxury objects, brought to the camps especially by women, was quite different than in the world outside of the camps. One may argue, especially in this context, that luxury is connected primarily with the body (not sex or gender, though it comes in gender specific varieties), is a convenience, a bodily pleasure more than a pleasure of the mind. This is why it is easily connected with women (and feminization) as they are always entering the public space with their bodies.<sup>16</sup> In fact references to luxury items in the camp memoirs suggest that it is the body itself that gives luxury a meaning.

Luxurious objects are only rarely mentioned in men's memoirs, and usually only as silk shirts or underwear of "kapos' boys," with a homosexual undertone in the narration. An interesting "luxury object" is described in Stanislaw Grzesiuk's memoir *Pięć lat kacetu* [Five Years in Concentration Camps].<sup>17</sup> It is not only its nature, but also the material it was made of and the fact that it was made inside the concentration camp. Grzesiuk refers to a decoratively fashioned bracelet and camp number in the following paragraph:

This number cost a lot of cigarettes and several loaves of bread. It really was pretty. Fewer than twenty people had such numbers in the camp. Literally, such a one as I had, that is, made of human bone, well, I have no idea how many people could have had such a one. A pal from the sick-bay...managed to get for me in pathology a piece of boiled human shinbone, which was then made into my number and a bracelet.<sup>18</sup>

Another interesting example is provided by Tadeusz Borowski's confession: "We did not fight in the camps for the idea of the

<sup>16</sup> See: Belinda J. Carpenter, *Re-Thinking Prostitution: Feminism, Sex, and Self* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Grzesiuk, *Pięć lat kacetu*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 364.

Fatherland or for the inner reinvention of human beings; we fought for a bowl of soup, for a place to sleep, for women, gold and watches from the transports."<sup>19</sup> Thus in his words women are not only objectified but also listed among luxury items. Interestingly, they are among valuable objects that have no direct use in the camps and can be utilized there only as a form of currency. By the same token women are mentioned by Borowski in their role of an object of exchange typical for male kinship-building in a patriarchal society.<sup>20</sup> As luxury objects they served men to construct their gender role and to perform their masculinity.

In memoirs written by women the luxury items are always brought from the outside world, but the "outside" luxurious items do not always serve as a "luxury" inside the camps. Many authors refer to Elizabeth Arden cosmetics and Guerlain perfumes, along with fashionable shoes and dresses, as objects brought by Jewish women to Dachau or Auschwitz. Zofia Kossak in her memoir *Z otchłani* [From the abyss] writes:

[R]ich Jewesses from foreign countries, who were not aware of the fate awaiting them, were coming to Auschwitz with many things. In addition to exquisite clothing and bedding, they carried perfume by Guerlain and Elizabeth Arden cosmetics, ballroom dresses, tennis equipment, medical kits, anti-conception aids (the latter was the specialty of French Jewesses), children's toys... diamonds.

Gems of Dutch merchants, treasures and heirlooms of old bankers families of Amsterdam, were coming hidden in hair, dresses, a granddaughter's teddy bear, in the patriarchal wig of a grandmother.<sup>21</sup>

The luxury items are later referred to or described in memoirs, sometimes in quite surprising context, as for instance in the "overflow" camp in Birkenau, called by prisoners "Mexico." "This sector

<sup>19</sup> Janusz Nel-Siedlecki, Krystyn Olszewski, Tadeusz Borowski, *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo MON, 1958), 6-8.

<sup>20</sup> See: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>21</sup> Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, *Z otchłani* (Rzym: Polski Dom Wydawniczy, 1946), 114.

is not meant for permanent living quarters. It is not an independent part of the camp like other sectors and has no...kitchen, or sanitary installations. Mexico is treated like a branch or colony, kept in reserve for emergency in case of extreme overpopulation in the sector 'c,'" writes Seweryna Szmaglewska.<sup>22</sup> According to her, in 1943 there were up to 42,000 women in Birkenau, and the camp was extremely overcrowded as camp "c" and Mexico "normally" could not accommodate more than 28,000. Unprepared for such a large number of prisoners, the Nazi authorities also ran out of uniforms for women. In other camps in such cases prisoners were given civil clothes with a large white cross painted on the back, but the choice of civil dresses given to women in Mexico may be surprising. Szmaglewska writes:

Idleness is one of the worst curses in this city of women. Weak from exhaustion, each day more ragged in appearance, they move among the blocks, awaiting their fate in the heat of the summer days. Their dresses, often of silk and lace, sometimes backless evening gowns, scorched by many delousing, cracked and torn, fall off their bodies.<sup>23</sup>

Szmaglewska's description is not the only account of ballroom dresses or evening gowns given to female prisoners. Others also noticed upon their arrival in the camp a group of skeletons in ballroom gowns making their first impressions of the camp unreal and impossible to describe. In their memoirs several survivors recalled wedding veils given to women prisoners instead of handkerchiefs, as mandatory head coverings. The lace and silk dresses mentioned by Szmaglewska were undisputably luxurious and expensive, but also made to fit their original owners, thus of a limited use for other women and as such better utilized in the camp, when necessary. Of importance here may be the small body size of elegant Jewish women (noticed by many authors of memoirs) being at variance with the typical Nazi image of the German woman.

<sup>22</sup> Szmaglewska, *Dymy nad Birkenau*, 257.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

The ballroom dresses were made not to cover but rather to reveal the body, making it tempting and sexually attractive.<sup>24</sup> The body of a women prisoner, lacking beauty, sexless, and resembling a skeleton, was by no means sexually attractive, but women were still judged by the standards of modesty from the "free world" outside the camps. "It is generally said that women in Mexico lost all their shame and womanhood," wrote Szmaglewska. By pronouncing such a judgment prisoners were in fact repeating the gesture of the perpetrator and they double victimized women who were not given more suitable clothes. In several memoirs women stress that *cugangi* (the new prisoners) were looking into giving up their civil clothes and using camp uniforms seeing them as an identity forming item. For many women the uniform meant the enforcement and a representation of identity of a prisoner taking over all other social identities and thus civil clothes in the camps were a misleading sign of freedom. Asexual looks and behaviors were in line with the importance of reinforcing gender models in the camps. Deprived of their patriarchal functions prisoners were trying to save their humanity by performing gender in its most typical roles, and in the case of women it was above all the sexless role of a mother.

One should not ignore the fact that the majority of firsthand accounts comes from authors belonging to the intellectual circles, with a system of values recognizing the superiority of the mind over the body. They represent thus the same line of thinking that resulted in criticizing both the aristocratic luxury and the bourgeois consumerism, and saw inner growth and intellectual values as superior.<sup>25</sup> Thus it does not come as a surprise that in the reality of the camps luxury items could be enjoyed only by those whose moral values were questionable and who worked together with

<sup>24</sup> See: Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> See: Warren G. Breckman, "Disciplining Consumption: The Debate about Luxury in Wilhelmine Germany, 1890-1914," *Journal of Social History* 24 (1991), 485-505.

the perpetrators, making the intellectuals' judgment stronger and more just. Szmaglewska continues:

A functionary passes by, dressed snugly in high shoes and a colorful rubber cape. And quite nearby, beyond the wall, sits the bloc supervisor or the camp senior or another functionary in her cozy room. Dressed in the most fashionable style from head to toe, in dainty underwear and finely tailored dress, exquisitely sheer hosiery and shapely pumps with high heels, smelling a good perfume, her hair stylishly dressed, she sits, satisfied with herself and smiling with complacency.<sup>26</sup>

In a way typical for the intellectuals criticizing the bourgeois consumerism and luxury, she links it with "philistines" and their lack of taste when she writes:

The room is furnished – from the point of view of a camp – with luxury; from the point of view of camp conditions – with elegance; and from the point of view of prewar standards – with appalling lack of good taste. Genuine Oriental rugs, priceless tapestries, and rich Hungarian fabrics cover the walls and the furniture. On the bed there are sometimes as many as five down comforters, covered in blue, gold, or flowered satin – one to serve as the cover for the night, the others to be put under the sleeper.<sup>27</sup>

Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, describing the comfortable rooms of the functionaries, added some remarks about many "feminine" items and details and about pink being the favorite color of women living there.

It is important to realize that it was easier in the camps to acquire a new piece of wardrobe than to mend an old one, and the source of new clothes was the same for everybody, the transports of Jews to their final destination. This means that the prisoners, and in fact also the authors of memoirs, were most likely wearing blouses or sweaters of the luxurious, highest quality. However, the intended use of these objects was different than the enjoyment

<sup>26</sup> Szmaglewska, *Dymy nad Birkenau*, 259.

<sup>27</sup> Kossak, *Z otchłani*, 118.

described above; "ordinary" prisoners needed warm clothes to save their body, not to pamper it. The same can be said about expensive cosmetics (as only those were brought to the camps) from which only lipsticks were referred to favorably. Unlike perfumes used only by the functionaries, lipsticks were used by prisoners, who were coloring with them their cheeks to look healthier and have a better chance to survive "selections."

In 1945, Henryk Korotyński, another Auschwitz survivor, compared the concentration camp to a large city with its social life and structure based on different classes.<sup>28</sup> While the aristocracy comprised of functionaries and the so called "old numbers," the next class, bourgeois was composed by those prisoners who became rich by collecting and trading gold, diamonds and luxury objects brought to Auschwitz by Jews exterminated there. Several other authors, including Tadeusz Borowski, shared the same view of the camp and its structure, and luxury items were seen by prisoners primarily as a means to achieve the "bourgeois" status, with its accompanying lack of taste and questionable moral values. But luxury items, in their gendered variety, played also many other important and complex roles in the camps, as I hope I was able to show in this paper. Above all, the categories of gender and luxury allow for the re-reading of the memoirs of the camps from a new perspective, one that not only originates outside of the system but also brings to the fore issues situated at the intersection of gender, class, and race.

<sup>28</sup> Henryk Korotyński, "Kiedy będziemy znali Oświęcim," *Odrodzenie* 34 (1947): 2.

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## Filling the Blanks