BEHIND THE WIRES: GISELLA PERL'S STORY

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The article takes into discussion Gisella Perl's account of her experience in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Born in Transylvania and deported by the Hungarian government, as in 1944 Transylvania still belonged to Hungary, following the Dictate of Vienna of 1940, Perl's memoire written three years after her liberation becomes one of the first woman's voice that speaks about the destruction of the European Jews. Her story can be said to be part of a Transylvanian trilogy together with Eva Heyman and Ana Novac's diaries, the three Transylvanian women offering a very different, yet complementary view of the tragedy of Jewish people in the former Romanian province. Their styles differ, yet they are somehow connected through the world tragedy they speak about. Written as a means of confession, of escape or from the position of a spokesperson for those who cannot speak for themselves, Perl's story becomes an important historical and literary testimony of the darkest hour of human history.

Key words: Holocaust, Jewish, identity, women, survivor

Although we have a large number of male accounts of life and death in the German death camps during World War II, women were less open to tell their stories. They had gone through too much, they were too shocked as they had witnessed death, decay, rape and murder, so they were rather reluctant to speak about it. However, there were women who wrote about their experience behind the wires, either as direct participants (Eva Heyman or Ana Novac) or in retrospect (Gisella Perl). Behind the wires of the ghetto or the camp, or from memory, they speak about the destruction of the human being, his decay into beast, about humiliation and beatings, about life and death as a mere matter of chance. Their accounts become stories of pain, loss, survival in the case of Ana Novac and Gisella Perl, or, unfortunately, remain just a voice that speaks to us beyond the nameless grave in the case of Eva Heyman. The Nazi anti-Semitic policies targeted Jewish men and women at the same time, so women's stories need to be heard as well as they help reconstruct the darkest page of human history.

We can say that in certain ways women were more affected than men. During the years of anti-Semitic laws and later during the Holocaust their lives and identity were challenged from multiple perspectives. Raised to be first and foremost wives and mothers, suddenly they found themselves becoming providers of the family. Moreover, they were more exposed to death once they were deported, many of them being sent directly to the gas chambers. They were too old, too young, too thin, too weak, without any profession, or simply they refused to let their children go without them, a thing which meant death for them too. However, if they survived selection, they had to witness the murder of their loved ones: parents, husbands and especially children, as children were doomed to death upon arrival at Auschwitz.

The Transylvanian women's accounts of the years of the anti-Semitic laws and deportation include the diaries of Eva Heyman and Ana Novac and Gisella Perl's memoires.

Eva Heyman, Gisella Perl and Ana Novac (born Zimra Harsányi) may be said to have become writers as products of History, although Ana Novac will become a writer of profession in her later life. However, one cannot stop and wonder what her career would have been if she had not experienced the cruel reality of the camps which she recorded Ana Novac's diary is considered to be the only diary known to have been written at Auschwitz that managed to get out of there and be published later.

All three women were born in Transylvania and were deported by Hungary, not by Romania, as in 1944 when the deportation of Hungarian Jews started, Transylvania belonged to Hungary following the Dictate of Vienna of 1940. Gisella Perl was born in Sighet, she spoke fluently five languages (Hungarian, Romanian, German, French and Yiddish), and she loved art and beauty. She was an accomplished doctor at the time of her deportation from Sighet. Coming from a traditional Jewish family, in which the role of women was reduced to being wives and mothers, she managed to convince her father to let her study medicine promising that she will not abdicate from Jewish traditions. She was married to a doctor and they had two children, a boy and a girl.

However, times changed. Northern Transylvania was conceded to Hungary according to the Dictate of Vienna. Anti-Semitism became open and Jews were more and more marginalised. Her account speaks little of this period. She does mention, however, that in 1943 as the Germans were losing the war, dr Capesius, a pharmacist visited her. He was impressed by her knowledge of German literature and by her son's interpretation of Hubay's *Violinist from Cremona*. Then, the scene suddenly shifts and we see both of them again, this time at Auschwitz, on the selection platform, separated by an invisible line: the Jews and the Nazis. This time Perl is no longer the doctor but the Jew while Capesius is no longer the pharmacist selling products, but the Nazi.

In the *Foreword* to her memoire she asks the question that has haunted humanity ever since the discovery of the realities of the camps: how was this possible: "We shall never be able to understand how a people which produced Kant, Goethe, Beethoven, Bach, Dürer and many other incomparable geniuses could sink so deep in the morass of depravity, crime and the enjoyment of torture that every human being who watched them felt ashamed of belonging to the same species."[1]

Meanwhile, here she offers the reason for writing her memories of the time spent at Auschwitz and later at Bergen-Belsen: a liberation and an act of honouring the memory of the dead: "I offer this book as a monument commemorating the events of the years 1940-1945, commemorating Nazi bestiality, Nazi sadism, Nazi inhumanity and the death of their six million innocent Jewish victims. Every individual story, every picture, every description is but a stone in that monument which will stand forever to remind the world of this shameful phase of history and to ask of it vigilance, lest the events of these years be repeated."[2]

After confinement to the ghetto, Perl is deported with her family and arrives at Auschwitz, but nothing has prepared her for the conditions of the camp. All survivors reported the same things: the perimeter of the camp was a world in itself, with rules that were incomprehensible to a sane mind, in which the prisoner lost all that linked him to the real world,

[1] Gisella Perl, (1948), *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, International Universities Press , p 12.
[2] Ibidem, p 12.

from here the first shock, which was later followed by other shocks as days went by: "The Nazis created a new universe in the camps – a universe with its own language, theology, history, literature, and anthropology. Words and the meaning of words were changed indicating the creation of a new vocabulary. Auschwitz is no longer just a place name in Poland; it is an evocative symbol with conjures up the most profound confrontation of the twentieth century: the meeting of the human with the atrocities of the death camps. The Nazis seized the prerogatives once allowed to God. They became the arbiters of life and death, and assumed the role of God; God and humans changed places. History was reordered. Being became illegal and described as life unworthy of life – a subspecies the killing of which was ordered at whim."[3] As a doctor she had to work with those whose sole wish was to kill. Her situation becomes paradoxical and meanwhile torturing: how can a human being who had sworn to preserve life do that in a world which was especially designed for death?

She loses her son and her parents immediately after selection. Her ordeal begins; an ordeal that she will survive only to find out that she had lost all her immediate family. She tries to kill herself, is saved and is told "to believe in love and to give love"[4] She emigrates to the USA and later to Israel, with her daughter whom she finds out that had managed to survive as well, being taken by a Christian family. Her story is no different that so many told by other survivors. Yet, the way in which she tells it makes it unique.

Unlike Ana Novac, whose diary written at Auschwitz on scraps of paper speaks with sarcasm and defiance about everyday tasks, rather than offering the general picture, Perl speaks about every step of dehumanization: from the first image of the camp on the selection ramp, to the loss of clothes, hair, identity and human dignity: "I knew that I had died on that March 19, when the Germans overran Hungary and compelled us to give up everything that meant anything to us, pushing us into a ghetto first, then robbing us of possessions, freedom and finally even of human dignity, in this seething, crawling, burning inferno. Here I was only a shadow without identity, alive only by the power of suffering."[5]

Writing about her ordeal becomes her mission, as well as a warning against any further similar events: "'L'Allemagne Eternelle', which boasts the ruthless cruelty of its people, shows its real face on the pages of this book. You, who have spent your lives under the protection of the Statue of Liberty, stop before this monument and read its inscription. Read them, engrave them in your souls and carry them with you as a memento! The dead are speaking to you here. The dead, who do not ask you to avenge them but only to remember them and to be watchful that no more innocent victims of German inhumanity ever swell their ranks…"[6]

It is exactly this loss of humanity on the whole that Perl speaks about and that was remarked by those few critics who wrote about her work, one of them, Anca Bărbulescu writing in the *Preface* to the Romanian edition "The author starts by telling us the story of a loss of a world, of the loss of *home*. But it's not just nostalgia and the feeling of missing that world, but the sadness, disappointment and anguish generated by the lack of reaction of others. It's a

[3] Frederick L. Downing, (2010), *The Poetics of Memory and Justice: Elie Wiesel and Post-Holocaust Theological Reflections* in Harold Bloom, (ed), 'Elie Wiesel's Night', Edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom, Sterling Professor of the Humanities, Yale University, Infobase Publishing, New York, p 155.
[4] Gisella Perl, op cit., p 189.
[5] Ibidem, p 56.
[6] Ibidem, p 12.

feeling that we often find in the stories of the survivors. The deafening silence of the others."[7] (our translation)The past is viewed with nostalgia, but meanwhile with a helpless pain as far as indifference is concerned. The image of indifference is raised to a new dimension: it was not only that the people were indifferent but also nature. It is as if God Himself looked aside: "In vain did we look to the mountains, the town, the people for help. Only death was to deliver us from suffering."[8]

We have the same silence that Heyman spoke about, or which Wiesel calls not silence but indifference: "I'm simply trying to pull the alarm and say, Don't be indifferent. Simply because I feel that indifference now is equal to evil. Evil, we know more or less what it is. But indifference to disease, indifference to famine, indifference to dictators, somehow it's here and we accept it. And I have always felt that the opposite of culture is not ignorance; it is indifference. And the opposite of faith is not atheism; again, it's indifference. And the opposite of morality is not immorality; it's again indifference. And we don't realize how indifferent we are simply because we cannot be a little bit indifferent."[9]

This looking aside, this indifference as far as the once acquaintances and friends are concerned, this mixture of closing the eyes combined with envy and misguided beliefs led in the end to the destruction of the Jews:

> "A misguided fanaticism transformed civilized people into beasts who not only killed but tortured and murdered with joy and pleasure. A little bit of drawing-room anti-Semitism, some political and religious opposition, rejection of political dissidents – in itself a harmless mixture, until a madman comes along and turns it to dynamite. We have to understand this synthesis if the things that happened in Auschwitz are to be prevented in the future. When hatred and defamation quietly germinate, it's then, at that very moment, that we have to be alert and on guard. This is the legacy of the victims of Auschwitz.
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> The dead were strong; in their destruction they displayed a strength bordering on the colossal.
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> Can the living afford to be any weaker?" [10]

Perl writes her memoires as a way of healing, not of forgetting because that of course is impossible. Her writing is a way of mourning, of allowing herself to mourn and remember those who cannot speak for themselves anymore: "The suffering does not end when the victims of war are 'liberated'. It does not end when the displaced and uprooted find havens to flee to. The impact of the trauma is profound. It creates wounds that cannot necessarily be seen. The effect of the suffering is often silent and buried until the means are found for a story to be told."[11]

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[7] Anca Bărbulescu, (2022), *Prefață* la 'Am fost doctoriță la Auschwitz' de Gisella Perl, Traducere din limba engleză de Raluca Cimpoiașu, Editura Omnium, București, p 6.
[8] Gisella Perl, op. cit., p 20.
[9] Thomas J. Vinciguerra, (ed), (2001), *Conversations with Elie Wiesel. Elie Wiesel and Richard D. Heffner*, Schocken Books, New York, p 14.
[10] Lucie Adelsberger, (1997), *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Story*, Translated from the German by Susan Ray, With an Introduction by Deborah Lipstadt, Historical advice and annotations by Arthur J. Slavin, Published by BCA, pp 134-135.
[11] Judith Hassan, (2003), *A House Next Door to Trauma. Learning from Holocaust Survivors How to Respond to Atrocity*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, p 23

She speaks for the so many unknown victims, and more than that she speaks for the women victims. With Perl, we get a close view on what being a woman and a doctor meant at Auschwitz. A pregnant woman at selection was condemned to death. If she passed the selection, there was always a choice to be made: it was either the mother who survived or they were both, mother and baby, condemned to death. One of the toughest decisions Perl had to make was to kill a baby in order to save the mother. That is why, in her later practice, before bringing a baby into the world she reminded God that He owed her that new life: "Every time she entered the delivery room, she stopped first to pray: 'God, you owe me a life, a living baby.'"[12]

With Perl, we have a more complete and realistic view on the inside world of Auschwitz. We have the chance to meet different women, most of whom perished in the camp, to find out their life's stories, so that they survive in the collective memory. However, it is a world ruled by death and decomposition of humanity. When almost selling herself for a piece of extra food, she stops suddenly and decides that there is one thing that she will not allow the Nazis to take from her: her dignity as a human being: "No! I would not let this happen to me! I would come out of the apathy which had enveloped me for the last two months and show the Nazis, show my fellow prisoners that we could keep our human dignity in the face of every humiliation, every torture…Yes, I was going to remain a human being to the last minute of my life – whenever that would come."[13] It is exactly that matter of personal choice that Viktor Frankl, an inmate as well, later talked about: "Under the influence of a world which no longer recognized the value of human life and human dignity, which had robbed man of his will and had made him an object to be exterminated (having planned, however, to make full use of him first – to the last ounce of his physical resources) – under this influence the personal ego finally suffered a loss of values. If the man in the concentration camp did not struggle against this in a last effort to save his self-respect, he lost the feeling of being an individual, a being with a mind, with inner freedom and personal value."[14]

In the mud of inhumanity and despair, every human being behaved differently. Some turned to beasts, while others, just as Perl and Frankl, chose to keep their dignity at all costs: "And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstances, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate."[15] (Frankl, 2008: 75)

As weird as it may seem, in all that decaying world, men and women continued to connect, people did have a sexual life, even if that happened, paradoxically in the ugliest place, at the latrines. Shocked at the beginning to see that people could do that, Perl realizes in time that it was not an act of love. Rather it was an act of giving life a chance, of allowing oneself an act from the normal life they once had: "Our SS guards knew very well what was going on in the latrine. They even knew who was whose "kochana" (lover), and were much amused by

[12] Rachel E. Gross, 2020: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200526-dr-gisella-perl-the-auschwitz-doctor-who-saved-lives (accessed on 28th November 2023)
[13] Gisella Perl, op cit, pp 58-59
[14] Viktor E. Frankl, (2008), *Man's Search for Meaning*, The classic tribute to hope from the Holocaust, Part One Translated by Ilse Lasch, Preface by Harold S. Kushner, Rider, A Random House Group company, p 60.
[15] Ibidem, p 75

what was insane, filthy, bestial, horrible…the man-eating furnaces were burning, their flames were licking the sky…Millions were dying on their feet eaten upon alive by lice, hunger, disease – and in the latrines, lying in human excrements before the eyes of their fellow prisoners, men and women were writhing in sexual paroxysm. Hitler's dream of a New Order…" [16]

From Auschwitz she will be taken to Bergen-Belsen. It is here that she finds the bodies of her brother and her sister-in-law in a pile. If Auschwitz was hell, Bergen-Belsen cannot be described in human words: "Belsen Bergen was the terminal. It was supreme fulfillment of German sadism and bestiality. Belsen Bergen can never be described, because every language lacks the suitable words to depict its horrors. It cannot be imagined, because even the most pathological minds balks at such picture."[17] This incapacity of language to render the supreme bestiality of human beings turned against other human beings is a recurrent theme in survivors' accounts.

It is at this moment that her tone becomes the angriest and the most accusatory. She becomes the prosecutor in the name of the many silent victims that cannot speak for themselves, as Bergen-Belsen is the ultimate station of inhumanity: "Let no one speak to me of German culture, German civilization! Belsen Bergen was the faithful portrait of German civilization – Belsen Bergen mirrored the German soul…"[18]

With the exception of Heyman, who does not survive, both Perl and Novac have to find their way back to life, to leave the wires totally behind, or at least to put them aside for a while: "Relearning to live would involve strategies which would serve as an antidote to the death, destruction, powerlessness and dehumanisation encountered by the victim during his/her incarceration. To be truly liberated is to no longer feel a victim at the mercy of another's brutality. To no longer be a victim is to have an identity, to have dignity, to have control over one's own destiny."[19]

As far as the Holocaust is concerned, it will stay forever as a stain on humanity. The Final Solution may have been the invention of the Germans, but it was carried out with the help of the locals in many parts of Europe, and it started with the indifference of the entire world: "*The Holocaust remains with us, a permanent stain on the human experience and on the individual psyche. Psychiatrists can ill afford to ignore its impact on psychiatry. This particular trauma deserves continuous scrutiny. From it we may still draw knowledge to assist not only the aging survivors of the Holocaust but victims of contemporary genocides, persecution and torture.*"[20] (italics used by the editors)

Gisella Perl's account of her months spent in Auschwitz and later in Bergen-Belsen is made with an accusatory tone, just as if she puts on trial the destruction industry invented by the Nazis. In her account, she has neither the innocence of Eva Heyman, nor the sarcasm of Ana Novac. Gisella Perl is full of anger, bitterness and fury, her account being transformed in a prosecution's indictment in which she is both the prosecutor and the victim.

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[16] Gisella Perl, op cit., p79
[17] Ibidem, p 166
[18] Ibidem, p 169
[19] Judith Hassan, op. cit., p 78.
[20] Robert Krell, Marc I. Sherman, , (ed), (2017), *Medical and Psychological Effects of Concentration Camps on Holocaust Survivors*, With a Foreword by Elie Wiesel, Published by Routledge, Taylor&Francis Group, New York p 16.

With her we have another story, this time told in retrospect, about the fate of Jews in Nazi occupied Europe. She is not a writer of profession, this being her only book, a book she felt she needed to write as a confession and testimony. It helps her heal and meanwhile it offers the reader an insight in the vast machinery of death. In spite of the fact that she had no writing training, her testimony becomes a valuable piece of memoires which presents us the inner and outer fight of a woman caught in the wheel of history: "Whenever I see the word 'Six Million Dead' or 'Six Million Jewish Victims' printed in a newspaper, my hands harden into fists and my heart beats stronger with revolt. Those six million dead are so many terrible, heartbreaking stories they are Bettys and Roses and Annes, they are Julikas and Charlotte Jungers, each and every one of them represents not only the second of death, however horrible that is, but an entire, colorful, exciting human life, a past, and what is more, a future…"[21] Every human life that was so brutally ended and without any explanation means the loss of a world, just as Wiesel so beautifully said later: "In the Holocaust, a million and a half Jewish children were killed. How many Nobel laureates among them? How many scientists, how many physicians, how many researchers? Maybe one of them or two of them or ten of them would have invented a remedy, a cure, for AIDS, cancer, heart conditions."[22]

Besides being a historical document, Perl's memoir *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* is a tribute to all these people who found their death in the Final Solution. The historical and literary value are interwoven, offering us both a personal and general picture of the deadliest human experiment ever imagined, created and brought to an end by human beings in a world in which race was the only thing that mattered.

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