

Bestsellers from Auschwitz. Guardians of Memory Versus the Auschwitz Gang

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Foreword

Agnieszka Dauksza

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Life as a series of sensations and scandals – this is how the symbolic exchange is played out on the literary scene, especially online. The participants are all the actors in the drama – writers, publishers, editors, translators, critics, reviewers, researchers, jurors, promoters, observers, self-promoting “book lovers,” and finally “non-professional” readers, sometimes known as “normies.” It would scarcely be an exaggeration to claim that social media sites are the appropriate space for this exchange, and the media, publishing houses, universities, foundations and judging panels in this respect are merely collateral suppliers of “content.” And practically everything that counts for discussion on the literary scene is played out today in the Facebook culture – in streams or their recordings, through posts and comments. Even if a discussion exists previously in the non-virtual sphere, soon it will move to social media. It seems not to occur to any of the participants in this dynamic exchange that it might be possible to separate this intertwining of the aesthetic, economic, political, identity-based and emotional.

In some spaces, however, affects and facts circulate somehow differently – not so much functioning by another logic as spawning different expectations. Some users, for example, demand “purity” of intentions from authors and publishers and a distinction between the factual and fictional, authentic

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and self-aggrandizing, ethical and opportunistic. One such field is the trend for literature about Auschwitz – or rather, in many cases, an imitation of Auschwitz. These are published as a glut of “striped” novels, characterized by the striped camp uniforms in the cover illustration, popular in the West since the 1990s, and taking the bestseller charts by storm in Poland in the last few years. Novels employing the “Auschwitz of Auschwitz”¹ formula – some translated into Polish, others written in the language and dubbed “Holo-Polo”² – are based on predictable plotlines, using the context of historical events to address “universal” problems, mostly about difficult interpersonal relations. Readers are therefore introduced to various acts of solidarity, betrayal, friendship, love, and resistance that occur under the pressure of ideology, enslavement, isolation, and violence. The events usually take place not at Auschwitz as a historical space of genocide, but against Auschwitz as a backdrop, in a non-place created in the author’s imagination and only loosely related to the factual time and place. Similarly fanciful is the novels’ supposed kinship with real-life people, descriptions of camp reality, and the everyday lives of prisoners and camp functionaries.

So why, one might therefore ask, play with authenticity like this? And why Auschwitz? Since the bestsellers’ authors attach so little importance to the camp’s factuality and materiality, what is their reason for referring to a real space, thereby opening themselves to accusations of inaccuracy? And what is the point of the tortuous playing with other people’s emotions and expectations, operating on the soft tissue of community remembrance and opening the wounds of those who lived through the camps or found themselves in close proximity to the experience?

A seeming side effect is undoubtedly one of the strategy’s objectives: the publication of such books as Heather Morris’s *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* tends to result in heated discussions, mass criticism, polarized opinions, and calls for boycotts, censorship, legal action and so on. Controversy, suitably whipped up and harnessed for marketing goals, becomes part of the promotion campaign, and of course results in healthy sales. The choice is not accidental – ever since the 1940s, Auschwitz has functioned in the public consciousness as the epicenter of the violence of the Second World War, and for many years it has been the place, more than any other, that has captured the attention of scholars, historians, politicians, survivors and their families, authors of memoirs, people of culture, film makers, journalists, bodies funding conservation work and subsidizing support for survivors, popularizers, tourists, vandals, but also conspiracy theorists and thieves stealing post-camp property.

1 The title of the “ultimate bestseller” proposed by Przemek Dębowski in response to news that five of the 20 bestselling books in Poland in early 2020 were stories using a concentration camp as a backdrop. See <https://www.facebook.com/przemekdebowski.prace/posts/2827138370711324>, accessed September 21, 2023.

2 Sylwia Chutnik’s term.

A snowball effect took place: the camp acquired new meanings, references, citations and uses. Auschwitz became a brand in its own right and its celebrity began to endure: first as a starting point for philosophical, ethical and legal discussions, a place of worship and memory and a material foundation for archaeological research and commemorative practices, and finally as a tourist heritage museum, a literary and visual protagonist, a film star or an important cultural reference point. For many, by force of habit, Auschwitz – the symbol and cliché – began to operate as the foundation of the lucrative Holocaust factory.

That this remains a seductive potential is no surprise. Contemporary authors of popular stories employ symbolic and visual connotations to offer products imitating Auschwitz, which are easily recognized and classified by the relevant consumer groups. The immediacy and ease of association – for example of the motif of striped uniforms, watchtowers and barracks, ramps, gates, and the sign – guarantees a quick profit. Auschwitz pays – not only for the sharks of the publishing world.

The popular “The [Blank] of/from Auschwitz” narratives have been described as discount novels – widely available, easy to digest, compact, and packed in unambiguous, eye-catching covers. It seems, though, that their main audience is not people who chance upon them while standing in line at the checkout. The most engaged group reading Auschwitz bestsellers know exactly what they are looking for and wait for the latest installments in the series – loyal fans of their authors attending meetings, enthusiastically commenting on their books and sharing their impressions on social media.³ These “striped” novels are the foundation of their reading experience, a source of emotions, excitement, entertainment, consolation and reinforcement, but also a reason for participating in the community of people reading, discussing and recommending. Often these are the only books, the only literature that encourages them to read. Its community-forming function is hugely important – the media circulations of such books are often enormous, with their readers giving thousands of ratings, leaving hundreds of comments, and discussing and recommending other novels to each other.

And yet it is also for this reason that more specialized readers criticize and downplay the Auschwitz bestsellers. The catchiness and connectivity of reading them is remarkable – readers declare that they couldn’t put the book down, that it captured their time, attention, feelings, enabling them to “pass through the whole of Auschwitz in two days.”⁴ Of course, Auschwitz novels do not teach about the war or show the scale of violence; they are just “more or less” about the Holocaust. And

3 Such sites in Poland include LubimyCzytać, BiblioNETka, NaKanapie, but comments on book blogs, Instagram and Facebook groups are also a significant phenomenon.

4 From a comment on the book *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* published at <https://lubimyczytac.pl/ksiazka/4845001/tatuazysta-z-auschwitz>, accessed September 1, 2023. Further readers’ comments that I quote were published on the same website.

this is the main criticism leveled at their authors and publishers: that by playing the authenticity card and implying realism – for instance by using a first-person narrative supposedly drawing from survivors’ testimonies – they intentionally tear up the biographical pact, irresponsibly juggling facts taken out of context and cynically exploiting well-known motifs to present fictitious, tear-jerking stories high on pathos.

They are also accused – rightly – of deluding readers with facile consolation and underplaying fundamental experiences; furthermore, they are formally simplistic, predictable, using trite models of emotional behaviors, distorting historical reality, impersonating actual, historical figures and borrowing their fate and memories, with distribution and promotion methods so intrusive that they only cement their status as trash literature.

But if we are to use “discount” terminology, I would rather compare the phenomenon of these books to the popularity of the “Goodness Gang,” plush toys depicting fruit and vegetables first offered in 2016 and 2017 as part of a loyalty program by the Biedronka supermarket chain. The toys were given out as “free gifts,” in exchange for repeated shopping, rewarded with stamps. The campaign supposedly educated consumers and popularized healthy eating – more stamps were available for purchasing fruit and vegetables. In practice, though, it was about promoting Biedronka, resulting in a growth in sales of 11.9% in 2016, proving one of the most profitable ventures in the history of Polish trading.⁵ The reason for this was the mass desire for the stuffed toys – customers shopped more often “for stamps,” standing in line, competing and fighting over toys, setting up forums and groups with information about availability and for swapping, driving to other towns and cities in the search for missing characters, and engaging in backstreet deals for toys as well as stamps. And all this for moderately attractive, cheaply produced plush toys that sated childish desires and ambitions to possess them. There was probably a chain of collector’s instincts at work, cranking up the temporary fashion – young people were desperate to complete the entire gang, and their parents set themselves the task of helping out.

The way the latest Auschwitz bestseller – or the Auschwitz gang, as we might call them – is presented is based on an analogous mechanism of training consumers to be loyal to the convention and to participate in a community of people up to speed with the latest developments “at Auschwitz.” The pretext for publication of these books is supposedly historical education, raising awareness of the consequences of ideology, keeping the memory of the victims alive, shaping readers’ imagination and empathy, and ensuring narrative continuity. In practice, however, it is about making the books’ consumers open to a given format and instantly able to recognize cultural clichés. The will to take on board further impressions “from the

5 Cf. “Gang świeżaków’ wraca do Biedronki. Jeden kosztuje nawet 2,4 tys. zł,” accessed August 25, 2023, <https://wyborcza.biz/biznes/7,147743,22270375,gang-swiezakow-wraca-do-biedronki-jeden-kosztuje-nawet-2-4.html?disableRedirects=true>.

series" results in demand, wide circulation, and repeated profits – loyal readers are hungry for the next installments of stories from the camp.

Some readers develop a condition resembling addiction: they expect the book to replicate the template of a camp story, yet satisfaction does not come solely from a return to what they know; what they need is a return with a shift, including in the reading experiences elements of difference, change, novelty, and surprise. Fans of Biedronka's Goodness Gang set themselves the objective of collecting all its characters: Rafael the Radish, Piers the Pea, Billy the Blueberry, and so on. But even securing the whole collection did not guarantee satisfaction: apart from the stuffed toys, one could also amass special stickers depicting the fresh heroes and watch short films and cartoons, and in the next installments of the campaign acquire the "new members of the gang" – Christmas specials, juniors, and then other spin-offs.

Readers of the novels on the "striped" production line also collect the latest books – adventures, intrigues, motifs, and protagonists – and above all collect reading experiences, which they then review on websites with red or yellow stars. For it is not actually about the formal, aesthetic or ethical aspects of this literature, but about its effect on readers, experiences replicating everyday life that can be shared with others. And so communities are formed of those who found *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* "unputdownable," for whom *The Sadist of Auschwitz* "plucked at the heartstrings," and who were "soothed" by *Auschwitz Lullaby*. Those who have completed the "full set" of bestselling titles become pickier and more demanding, expecting further titles to move different registers of emotions, demonstrate thematic innovation, and introduce them to an "unknown" Auschwitz, an "unseen" one "forgotten by history."

Two trends are interesting. One is an emerging rhetoric of snobbism among regular readers of the novels, who feel that they have an excellent mastery of the subject of the camp and know Auschwitz like the back of their hands. The other is an escalation of readers' needs: according to commenters, each book should deliver increasingly intensive experiences, test the limits of emotional resilience, acting like a poison that in the right dose can strengthen the individual's position, lead to renewal, and change ways of feeling and remembering. Users of the *Lubimyczytac.pl* website testify that "When reading this book, I experienced everything that happened."⁶

Sometimes, the view that a novel does too little to stimulate emotions becomes the source of criticism. Yet these charges are usually leveled from the position of experienced members of the reading group, connoisseurs of the series, at fellow "insiders" involved in the "of Auschwitz" community. One disappointed reader of *The Tattooist* commented: "insipid descriptions. [...] If not for the concentration camp

6 "Sekret Elizy. Auschwitz. Płatna miłość" [Eliza's secret. Auschwitz. Love at a price] by Dominik W. Rettinger, *Lubimyczytac.pl*, accessed September 25, 2023, <https://lubimyczytac.pl/ksiazka/4900486/sekret-elizy-auschwitz-platna-milosc>.

theme, I doubt anyone would read this book." Another, after reading *Eliza's Secret. Auschwitz. Love at a Price*, lamented the inadequate clarity of the plot: "What bothered me most was the ending, which suddenly became chaotic. I don't like open endings in general, and here it particularly didn't fit and frustrated me how many questions I still had in my head after the last sentence of the book."⁷ Included in the price are transparent compositions and the black-and-white, "strong" conclusions to the plot that guarantee such emotions. Shades and nuances, ambiguities and attempts at formal invention lead to clouded emotions that are seldom among readers' spectrum of expectations.

Readers expect the satisfaction resulting from the chance to trace the tensions between the factual and the fictional – as one reader put it, "A certain spice is added by the fact that the plot is interspersed with an authentic, factual account."⁸ The first level of "spice" is the general awareness that the events of the novel could have taken place in reality – even if they did not, the fact that they might have (as the publishers' blurb suggested) means they effectively did take place. The logic of enhanced realism fits in with the need for authenticity and intensity of feeling: sometimes it allows readers to identify and empathize with the characters, and at other times it brings relief owing to distance from the events that are depicted.

The second level of reception is the pleasure that results from controlled uncertainty: the reader engages in the reality of the novel, but is unsure which elements are authentic, and which fictional. This brings a desire to "check" the authors, tracking and comparing the plotlines and historical facts. Detective readers, searching for distortions, changes, and errors, gain a sense of controlling not only their own emotional experience (of engaged reading), but also the depicted world, which they associate with a sense of "controlling" Auschwitz as a set of data.

This mechanism, incidentally, is not confined to Auschwitz novels – an analogous pact linking publishers, authors and readers also applies to other historical events and novels "inspired" by the Warsaw Uprising or everyday life in occupied Poland. One might consider to what extent the demand for these books results from a need to work through past wrongdoings to the Polish community or a return to stories past down in families. Equally popular, however, are novels set in the Jagiellonian era, at the time of Viking conquests, or in Ancient Rome. It appears that historical backdrops are just one of the elements needed to create a bestseller effect. Another important factor is the possibility of recognizing in stories from tough times more universal, recurring patterns in the functioning of a community. The combination of these components, together with an implied authenticity of the message – "this really happened" – results in maximum engagement from readers.

7 "Sekret Elizy. Auschwitz."

8 Ibid.

However, there is one more factor that results in popular historical novels' widespread recognition. It is possible for readers to compare the elements of the narrative's setting with what remains from the event: traces, leftovers, spaces that can be pinpointed and visited. Such a trip – for example to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum – and reading novels become complementary acts in “experiencing” Auschwitz from the position of a reader and tourist. Consumers search for the “differences” between the qualities of the novel and the museum, frequently deeming them to be equivalent cultural texts that can be treated in a functional manner, for example by taking selfies outside the crematorium and posting photos on social media.⁹ For many users, the proximity of the materiality is a key reason for their interest in popular war stories. It is no coincidence that the demand for historical bestsellers goes hand in hand with a fashion for family searches for “treasures” using metal detectors, participation in historical reconstructions, walks and excursions in the footsteps of past heroes, and dark tourism, meaning “alternative” visits off the beaten track and away from the sites usually visited by guides. The interest in dark tourism as a cognitive alternative combines the need for authenticity, immediacy, personal engagement, and at least partial assumption of the role of a “latecomer”¹⁰ or “reconstructed witness”¹¹ – someone not directly connected to an event, but seeking to understand its “aura,” imagine its atmosphere, and “feel” its traces. These approaches are probably closer not to the figure of the delayed witness, but the gawker or bystander. Yet this does not change the fact that it is the perspective of this group that today dominates among consumers of popular culture, history buffs and visitors to commemorative institutions, which also has a secondary impact on their profile and work.

The pressure of popularization, along with its simplifications, distortions, errors, abuses, and commercialization of the past, is something from which guardians of memory attempt to protect Auschwitz. The criticism and pressure that apply in other service sectors and force producers to react have no major impact on publishing decisions and readers' preferences. With “Auschwitz of Auschwitz” books, critical discussions go on among people connected with literature – the titles change, but

9 On “inappropriate” behavior in a post-camp space, cf. Iwona Kurz, “Nieznosna lekkość reprezentacji,” *Didaskalia* 120 (2014), and the article of Karolina Marcinkowska, Dominik Puchała, Michał Bilewicz, Dominika Bulska, Mikołaj Winiewski and Maciej Górski, “Śmiech w Auschwitz, czyli o tym, w jaki sposób psychologia może pomóc zrozumieć łamanie tabu w miejscu pamięci Zagłady,” *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2023).

10 Cf. M. Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

11 Cf. Dori Laub, “An Event without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,” in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature. Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York, London: Routledge, 1992).

the arguments, though substantively justified, are repetitive. Indeed, they demonstrate not only the professional distance of critics and researchers. The guardians of commemorative and factual decorum seem not to believe it possible to use arguments to influence writers or readers. They assume that these novels are socially harmful and should not exist at all. The public sphere is replete with calls to defend Auschwitz from bad art or imitations of art, from publishers' cynical motives as well as authors' self-aggrandizing and economic incentives. They are usually accused of breaking several fundamental rules, above all disturbing the truth and verifiability of facts and banal presentation of the Holocaust as a peculiar event, but one that can be represented, narrated, and depicted in a few dozen sentences. Yet the criticisms of authors, pressure on publishers and vigorous discussions do not necessarily result in tangible changes to market and reading trends. They probably have a larger influence on the profiling of literary criticism and research practices, as publishers follow profit margins, authors remain unmoved by rebukes, and readers stick to the tried and tested track. Any measurable impact is more likely to be consolidating the divisions between professional readers and the rest of the reading public, between more ambitious publishers and those specializing in "Auschwitz of Auschwitz" novels, and between self-respecting, creative cover designers and those with designs featuring watchtowers or striped uniforms to their name.

It makes little sense now to ask whether the trends can be reversed and popular writers can be taught to respect *The Event*, or whether the avalanche of bestsellers thematizing traumatic experiences can simply be stopped. The answer is certainly no, as demonstrated by the latest "fashions" for novels about the Balkan conflict or war in Ukraine. The question arises, however, about the reasons for the continuing demand for wartime and camp motifs and stories, the causes of the growing divisions between various types of readers, as well as the impact of these divisions on social issues, including the nature of commemorative practices. Contrary to appearances, both guardians of memory and fans of the Auschwitz gang and dark tourism work as a system of communicating vessels, like it or not jointly creating a common emotional community and remaining dependent on one another.

One must ask who represents these groups. It seems easy to classify them and divide them into those who have a problem with the Holocaust, because it is difficult, painful and important for them, those who seem to have no such problems, and those capable of benefiting from the problems of others. Discussions on the legacy of the Holocaust – concerning identity, intervention and diagnosis – are therefore based on the belief in the existence of an "us" who care about protecting Auschwitz's heritage, and "them," who have not mastered the rules of rhetoric, aesthetics and ethnics, are harmful to the Holocaust and its victims, and ruin the effects of "our" decades-long efforts.

Undoubtedly, this is the last moment for meetings in the public sphere of such diverse voices and perspectives of people with diverse experiences. They are the

victims – people who survived the Holocaust – and their families, the subsequent generations along with their post-memory relationship; perpetrators – their children and grandchildren; witnesses, bystanders and their descendants – including very delayed ones; beneficiaries of companies participating in the results of the Holocaust, often based on wartime capital even today; those who wrote that history, those who rewrite it and those who question it; managers of historical policy; groups researching the Holocaust, its direct and far-reaching consequences, teach about it, popularize it, guard its material remnants, conserve them and share them with others; finally, those who constructively and reconstructively intermediate Holocaust stories, who process the Holocaust artistically, present it or distance themselves from it, who use it objectively, or to promote themselves, or live off it, build capital on it, and appropriate it.

The thing is, however, that the division into “them” and “us,” into completely separate, isolated interest groups – those who have a problem with the Holocaust: defenders of Auschwitz and guardians of memory in one, and those who make money from it, by cynically seizing on others’ symbols, property, identity and memory – is fundamentally false. It is evident, after all, that all the actors figure together in the social circulation, competing for influence, status, memory, interpretations and profits, clashing in competencies, emotionally and politically, but often also – even despite themselves and unintentionally – acting for each other’s benefit, generating a dynamic that helps them mutually.

The field of references of Holocaust culture is characterized by intertwining trends that cannot be considered separately. Probably the most dominant functions at present are symbolic-memory, research, therapeutic, identity (and self-creation), mercantile, parasitical and that based on the principle of commensalism. However, even a cursory distinction of the types of action strategies of people (and groups) engaged in the heritage of the Holocaust makes it clear that each party is implementing more than one strategy, and this is inevitable. For example, theoretically the least embroiled group seems to be those researching the legacy of the war. Yet even they are not immune to political and institutional concerns. Meanwhile, “grassroots” fans of stories “of Auschwitz” who see researchers as a hermetic milieu writing and speaking in an alien code, do not necessarily view Holocaust research as somebody else’s mission; they perceive it as a profession – one of many offering the chance to obtain a position, receive a salary, apply for additional funding, grants, scholarships and fellowships, and seek to win distinctions and awards. They treat research as work that is not only an ethical commitment, but also an ambitious initiative, a field of development and advancement, a factor affecting symbolic status, influencing identity, defining the research community and marking their position in life.

If we take into account the degree of entanglement on all sides, it is difficult to base criticism of Auschwitz bestsellers solely on accusations of commercial

exploitation of the Holocaust or the self-aggrandizing, predatory "takeover" of this subject by popular authors. Of course, the question of financial and symbolic profits is not conclusive. There also remains the huge problem of historical ignorance, deliberate abuses, and incessant factual errors, which, at least in some circles, are starting to function as fact. But it is equally clear that popular convention need not be synonymous with that which is erroneous or cynical, and something pathos-laden, tear-jerking or "kitsch"¹² should not be equated with something immoral – aesthetics is not a subset of ethics, even in the case of the Holocaust. It is worth remembering that, firstly, forms of pathos and kitsch also operated in concentration camps, as did straightforward scenarios of emotional behaviors. Secondly, after the war many survivors of the Holocaust produced texts, paintings, sculptures, and films which, were we to consider them "dispassionately," without venerating their authenticity, could be seen as formally uncomplicated, gimmicky, and biased works. Thirdly, it is not only contemporary writers who make mistakes, distort, twist and manipulate. Unthinking, self-aggrandizing, traumatic, but also manipulative revision of facts was and remains a common phenomenon in the narratives of victims and witnesses.

And it is in this sphere that the field of exchange between experts and publishers, popular writers or readers should be opened or reinforced. Exchange, meaning dialogue crossing the line of division and going beyond hermetic rhetoric, superior attitudes, the instinct to mark of one's "own" field and patronizing gestures, in fact on both sides of the barricade. Just as Holocaust researchers, historians and institutional memory practitioners can be snobbish, so too can bestselling authors and their readers.

Moreover, all the sides are dependent on each other – some of the people visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum are viewers of *Schindler's List* or readers of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and the like, inspired by such cultural texts to come and see "how it really was." Seemingly conflicting interests and antagonistic or mutually exclusive outlooks often have a common denominator and are complementary, or at least increase each other's chances of success. Cutting off the branch of popular culture thematizing the war would affect the canon, destroy the flow of data, but also disrupt the circulation of social affects. In short, memories and narratives about the past would be petrified. Popular culture is not a threat; on the contrary, it guarantees the continuity of affective and memory exchange. Besides which, contrary to the intentions of guardians of memory, it is not possible to silence or censor the popular reactions to genocide. The Holocaust is not just a set of dates, numbers, and locations that can be contained once and for all, but a living tissue of cultural

12 On the kitsch nature of popular camp novels cf. Aleksandra Ubertowska, "Krzepiąca moc kiczu. Literatura Holocaustu na (estetycznych) manowcach," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 6 (2010).

feeling and thinking. It is therefore also a perverse capital, a space of aberration and profanation. And the post-Holocaust and (post)post-memory stage – like all the others – has its own rules.

The tensions between the conservative and experimental positions are probably key to understanding the contemporary phenomenon of the Auschwitz gang. These books take their place in the gap between the “right way,” the canonical convention of presentation of the Holocaust, respected by the majority, and “upstart” practices, initially infuriating to the insider community, labeled as scandalous, iconoclastic, impudent, but years later often seen as the avant-garde of the next stage of war testimonies and narratives. The stories of Tadeusz Borowski, Leo Lipski and Marian Pankowski are examples of this, as is Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Zbigniew Libera’s artwork *LEGO Concentration Camp*, the performance art of Artur Żmijewski, Jane Korman’s *Dancing Auschwitz*, and Ram Katzir’s coloring books.¹³

Against the background of these practices and their difficult perception, Auschwitz bestsellers are neither an extreme nor an exceptional phenomenon. On the map and intensity scale of Holocaust “profanations,” they play rather a mediocre role, despite having an undoubted wide reach and frequently being quoted. The Auschwitz gang books and experimental works differ in their degree of formal complication and are addressed to varying target groups, but what they have in common is their emergence “as a reaction” – not in a vacuum, but for someone and against something. They oppose Auschwitz conceived as a canon of knowledge and aesthetics, strictly defined ethical obligations that are untenable for future generations. They do not always represent a search for alternative means of expression, but usually find ways of freshening up the existing order of testimony, narrative, and representation. These might involve controversy, dissension, stoking of emotions and provoking – some people at least – to confront facts and material remnants. And undoubtedly, the higher the tower of The Event is raised, the greater will be the venting of emotions sought by those who are burdened by rules and conventions set by others, feeling and remembering according to the canon. Who has the right to Auschwitz today remains an open question – and the longer it remains open, the better for Auschwitz. As one reader of *Escape from Auschwitz* put it, “history smacks of private stories, but still, we’re damn well in this crap together.”

Translated by Ben Koschalka

13 On the gesture of artistic experimentation as a reaction to Holocaust “fatigue,” cf. Ernst van Alphen, “Playing the Holocaust,” in van Alphen, *Art in Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Przemysław Czapliński, “Zagłada i profanacje,” *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2009).

Abstract

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Bestsellers from Auschwitz: Guardians of Memory Versus the Auschwitz Gang

The text scrutinizes the phenomenon of popular Holocaust novels, whose plot usually plays out on the scene of Auschwitz. The author interprets their meaning in the broader context of the activities of the modern emotional community, in which clash the non-identical perspectives of victims their relatives, witnesses, bystanders, and beneficiaries of the Holocaust, along with memory politicians, guardians of memory, Holocaust scholars and educators, and those who treat it as an object of experimental practices. The author argues that all these social actors function in an inextricable intertwining of mutual dependency, which despite appearances and their goals, makes them jointly drive the effect of "citability" and "commerciality" of Auschwitz as a brand. The text distinguishes several dominant strategies of action in the field of Holocaust culture, which one could not consider in separation: symbolic-mnemonic, scholarly, (self-)therapeutic, identity-oriented (and self-fashioning), commercial, parasitic, and commensalist.

Keywords

Holocaust, Auschwitz, popular novels, bestsellers, emotional community, dark tourism