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An Introspective Approach to Women's Intercultural Fieldwork

Female researchers' narrations based on their
intercultural experiences from the field



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KATARZYNA TACZYŃSKA*

**“A Scattered Mosaic of Records
and Reminiscences”:
Ženi Lebl’s War Odyssey
in Her Personal Writings****

Introduction

Her flat is said to have looked like a “home laboratory” (“kućna laboratorija”) (Ristović, 2013, p. 35) filled with books, among which she enthusiastically kept working. Serving both as an office and an archive, her flat, besides the plethora of books, also housed a variety of other documents, brochures and maps. This undoubtedly must have made an extraordinary impression (Kaspi, 2013, p. 95). Her friends stress that Ženi Lebl (1927–2009), depicted in the present article, was a real industrious powerhouse, inspiring by example. She continuously encouraged and motivated others to act, willingly sharing her scientific discoveries and materials (Kaspi, 2013, pp. 93–94).

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Lacking a humanist education which would have provided her with research tools, she was a self-taught historian, who independently gathered knowledge and formulated her working method. Her vast knowledge and experience, which astounded academics who treated her as their equal in discussions at conferences, compensated for flaws in her methodology (Ristović, 2013, pp. 36–37). Working as if she was the head of a research institute, her studies never stopped and the end of one project was viewed by her as an opportune time to plan another (Čigoja, 2013, p. 53). She studied problems, analysed texts, translated and created both journalistic and artistic works, including poetry.² Since 1954 she permanently resided in Israel, but frequently travelled to acquire research material. She lived as if in suspension between Israel and Yugoslavia, in a world of broken pieces which she tried to arrange into a mosaic history. The instinct to migrate, both in a topographical and symbolic sense (Koch, 2000, pp. 52–53), accompanied her through all her life. This constant intellectual search and endeavours to expand the experiences of a multicultural migrant (Braidotti, 2009, p. 23) earned her the title of “a nomadic intellectual” (“nomadski intelektualac”, an epithet coined by Svetlana Slapšak, see Slapšak, 2013, p. 34). She was always happy to talk about her research projects, such as the need to investigate issues of antisemitism in Goli otok prison camp. However, she realized that she would not be able to fulfil all her plans, so she revealed them to others, encouraging them to finish these projects (Singer, 2013, pp. 44–46). She had excellent memory and was famous for her colourful, detail-filled stories and her recitations of childhood poems (Katan Ben-Cion, 2013, p. 104). Her extraordinary energy, cordiality, kindness, youthful smile and eyes brimming with life made it easy for her to connect with people (Knežević, 2013, p. 55; Ristović, 2013, p. 35).

For several years I have felt the need to pursue a more in-depth reflection on the autobiographical writings of Ženi Lebl. I first encountered the

² The published books include (dates in parentheses refer to the first edition of a given book): 1) autobiographical texts: *Dnevnik jedne Judite* (1990), *Ljubičica bela. Vic dug dve i po godine* (1990), *Odjednom drukčija, odjednom druga* (2008); 2) history books: *Plima i slom* (1986), *Jevreji u Pirotu* (1990), *Jevrejske knjige štampane u Beogradu 1837–1905* (1990), *Jerusalimski muftija* (1993), *Jevreji iz Jugoslavije – ratni vojni zarobljenici u Nemačkoj* (1995), *Haj Amin and Berlin* (1996), *Pitom shona, pitom acheret* (1998), *Etmol, hayom* (1999), *Do “konačnog rešenja” – Jevreji u Beogradu 1521–1942* (2001), *Do “konačnog rešenja” – Jevreji u Srbiji* (2002), *Da se ne zaboravi* (2008). Ženi Lebl also translated Israeli authors into Serbo-Croatian (see Ženi, 2013, pp. 114–115), and worked with 16th and 17th-century documents in Hebrew and Ladino (Ristović, 2013, p. 36).

work of the writer, a renowned scholar specializing in the history of Jews from the region of former Yugoslavia (Палавестра, 1998, p. 154; Пулибрк, 2011, p. 91; Ivanković, 2009, p. 9),³ through reading her memoirs (published in 1990) from prisons and camps she was sent to in 1949, after Yugoslavia had been expelled from the Cominform (see e.g. Banac, 1990; Stojanović, 1991; Kosić, 2009). Reading the book *Ljubičica bela. Vic dug dve i po godine* [*The White Violet: A Joke That Stretched for Two and a Half Years*] was an intense experience for me and motivated me to focus my research interests on the issue of prison camps. The taboo nature of this topic, the marginalization of women's experiences and the lack of any historical, literary or cultural studies into prison camps of the past – they all influenced my need to learn about one of the darker chapters of the history of post-war Yugoslavia.⁴

The memories of other people close to Ženi Lebl, reveal that for everyone fortunate enough to meet the author personally, or who encountered her through her writings, the meeting was extraordinary. Lebl had an uncommonly warm and energetic personality despite fate dealing her a tough hand. A past heavily marked by violence did not destroy her vitality and a reticence to express herself was overcome by an internal compulsion to write in order to give testimony to and share her experiences.

Let us have a brief look at the turbulent life of Ženi Lebl. Born in 1927 in Aleksinac, the writer always recalled the first years of her childhood as ones filled with tenderness, beauty and kindness for the Lebl family – father Leon, mother Ana and elder brother Aleksandar – which they spent first in Aleksinac, and then in Belgrade, where they moved when Ženi was five years old. Their situation changed dramatically during World War II, at first symbolically through a number of anti-Semitic regulations making everyday existence diffi-

³ Works on the history of Jews by Ženi Lebl received 26 awards in competitions organized by the Union of Serbian Jewish Communities (Savez jevrejskih opština Srbije). The competition was first organized in 1954 on the initiative of the President of the Union of Yugoslavian Jewish Communities (Savez jevrejskih opština Jugoslavije). The first award was given in 1955 (see Albahari). After Ženi Lebl's death the award was named in her honour – the Ženi Lebl Award (Nagrada "Ženi Lebl").

⁴ The issue of Goli otok prison camp was the topic of my doctoral thesis *Obraz Goli otok w serbskim dyskursie literackim i historycznym końca XX i początku XXI wieku* [*The Portrait of Goli otok Prison Camp in Serbian Literary and Historical Discourse at the End of the 20th and the Beginning of the 21st Century*], written under the supervision of Prof. Jolanta Sujecka and defended in 2014 at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

cult. An important event, foretelling the trouble brewing, was the introduction of the *Numerus clausus* rule in 1940, which made it difficult for Aleksandar to enrol in university.⁵ At that time her father was sent to military field training. Ženi in turn, influenced by an older school friend Ružica Vasikić, became a member of the Young Communist League of Yugoslavia (SKOJ – *Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije*). When the war broke out in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1941, the family were forced to fight for survival. Her father was arrested and sent to an Oflag in Germany, while in Belgrade the rights of Jews became drastically restricted, which in turn exacerbated significantly the situation of the Lebl family. Convinced that war primarily affects menfolk, Ana Lebl strove to send her son abroad. As Aleksandar was escaping to the Italian-administered territory aided by his newly acquired identity papers, in Belgrade a German order forced Jews to report to Staro Sajmište camp on the left bank of the river Sava.⁶ Guided by an unusual premonition, fourteen-year-old Ženi decided to run away to Sajmište the night before the exodus. She would learn only much later that all the Jews who had reported at the camp were murdered in gas vans (Serbian: *dušegupka*, German: *Gaswagen*). Ženi managed to escape to Niš, where she came under the protection of Jelena Glavaški, her teacher from Aleksinac kindergarten. Glavaški helped her obtain new identity papers under the name of Jovanka Lazić, and then both women began cooperating with the guerilla movement – they ran an illegal leaflet-printing operation in the attic of a private house and distributed the materials. When one of the members betrayed the group, both women were arrested in February 1943.⁷ As a Jew hiding behind Serbian identity, Ženi was first sent for her activities to a camp in Austrian New City (Wiener Neustadt),

⁵ On the introduction of this law in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (the case of Croatia) see Lengel-Krizman, 2006, pp. 1007–1012.

⁶ On the camp history see *Mesta stradanja...* 2013, pp. 176–207; Алмули, 2010, pp. 27–29 and the documentary film *Sajmište – istorija jednog logora* [*Sajmište – The History of a Camp*] directed by Marko Popović and Srđan Mitrović (2009), in which Ženi Lebl is one of the interviewees. The history of Jews during World War II is described in a study by Branislav Božović (see Божовић, 2012).

⁷ Jelena Glavaški was executed by a firing squad in 1944. On 3 September 1987 the Yad Vashem Institute recognized her as Righteous Among the Nations based on the testimony of Ženi Lebl. Today a street in Niš is named after her; see *Teachers Who Rescued Jews During the Holocaust: Jelena Glavaški, Serbia*. About an exhibition presenting Glavaški's life, see *Lokalna istorija – Jelena Glavaški, Pravednik među narodima*, 2012.

and then – probably in April or May 1944 (Ivković, 2013, p. 16, note 2) – to a labour camp in Berlin, where she worked in a metalworking factory. From there she was moved to a Gestapo prison but despite being sentenced to death, in the end she was freed in April 1945 and returned to Belgrade.

Returning to normal life was no easy task, but a determined Ženi dredged up reserves of strength bolstered by the fact that her father and brother survived the war and also returned to Belgrade. Filled by a belief in a new social order and free of prison camps and torture, Ženi – who kept her war name – Jovanka Lebl – decided to continue her education and to actively participate in the building of a new Yugoslavia. In 1947 she took part in a contest organized by the *Politika* newspaper and began working at their editorial office. However, a joke about Josip Broz Tito which she had heard from a colleague and unwisely repeated to her co-workers, became the reason behind her arrest and spell in a re-education camp. She was detained from 28 April 1949 to October 1951 and due to the living conditions in the camp and the way the prisoners were maltreated, she later viewed this time as one of the most traumatic experiences of her life. After returning to Belgrade she was ostracized as a Cominform member, ultimately leading to her decision to leave the country in 1954.

In Israel she was faced with starting a new life afresh. Her war and camp experiences had shaped her into a strong, enduring and brave woman with her own internal survival strategy. As an immigrant she learned Hebrew, worked and studied. She worked in a variety of jobs, finally settling on the profession of a radiology technician.⁸ Later, in 1964, she began working as a lecturer in a school for young technicians. This stability soon made it possible for her to research the history of Jews in Yugoslavia and until the end of her days she remained uncommonly active, dying in Tel Aviv on 20 October 2009.

The periods of interest in the part women played in Yugoslavian history were interspersed with times when their presence in the country's past was swept under the rug. It is the role of both male and female scholars to demand that women's texts be taken into account both in the literary canon (see Koch, 2007) and in the education process through the inclusion of women's activity in history coursebooks (see *Sjećanja žena žrtava...*, 2009). For a long time, the issue of

⁸ In an interview given to Dragoslav Simić in 1989, Lebl explained how difficult it was for the Yugoslavian elites to come to Israel. Many of them – doctors, lawyers, engineers – were unable to work in their professions as they did not know the language; see Simić, 2010.

women’s (lack of) presence in historical accounts remained beyond the scope of the official discourse in the former Yugoslavia. In Svetlana Slapšak’s critical opinion, the history of the region perceived from a woman’s point of view reveals the largest gaps in contemporary gender studies (Slapšak, 2009, p. 290). The need to include the female perspective in the research on former Yugoslavia’s history has been expressed with growing explicitness not only in the studies focusing on the events related to World War II (see *Sjećanja žena žrtava...*, 2009; Jambrešić-Kirin, Senjković, 2010; Pantelić, 2011) and communist prison camps (see Jamrešić-Kirin, 2010; Гароња Радованац, 2011; Taczyńska, 2014c, 2014d, 2015), but also on the more recent ones, concerning e.g. the civil war of the 1990s (see Jambrešić-Kirin, 2008). However, research texts (including historical literary and cultural studies) are still scarce, requiring completion, expansion and comparative analysis, both synchronic and diachronic.

According to Gerda Lerner, one of the most promising – and most challenging – spheres of studies on women’s history are their biographies (Lerner, 1988). Yet in the case of the former Yugoslavian countries, women’s biographical texts still need to be discovered in the archives and in the hiding places in homes⁹ and to be moved from fringe footnotes to the centre of historical narration (*The Challenge of Feminist Biography*, 1992, p. 7), as quite frequently they function as marginal annotations in historical analyses. Besides, even published women’s texts wait for a long time before drawing researchers’ attention. This can be exemplified by Ženi Lebl’s autobiographical works. The main aim of my work is to bring to light Lebl’s forgotten voice, her “invisible testimonies” (Ubertowska, 2009, pp. 214–226), which represent the personal experiences of this important scholar and function on the margins of humanist reflection. Furthermore, my article is an attempt to capture and present the distinctive features of female narration and its various forms. I treat the autobiographical texts by Ženi Lebl, both published in 1990 – *Dnevnik jedne Judite* [*Diary of a Judith*] (see Lebl, 1990a)¹⁰ and the previously mentioned *Ljubičica bela* – as significant “herstorical” sources (see Ubertowska, 2015, pp. 7–24).

In her famous essay *Camp as a Metaphor*, Serbian writer Marija Knežević bitterly reflected that the moment when one is faced with complete helplessness

⁹ Milka Žicina kept the manuscript relating her stay in the Glavnjača prison and Stolac camp under a false bottom in a kitchen cupboard; see Taczyńska, 2014a, p. 276.

¹⁰ The book uses copies of authentic advertisements. The illustrator was Geršon Apfel.

ness when having to try to describe war, is worse than war itself (Knežević, 1997, p. 15). Ryszard Kapuściński wrote that literature is far from perfect, and its value is measured by approximation, that is, by the ability to “get close to” (cf. Dominiak, 1997, p. 24). Considering their sometimes symbolic, hidden dimension, I nevertheless treat the personal writings of Ženi Lebl (cf. Leociak, 1997, p. 15) as “a space for giving testimony and not for creating representations” (Niziołek, 2013, pp. 32–33). These writings describe two horrifying events in the Yugoslavian history – World War II with particular emphasis on the Shoah and the isolation of political opponents of the Yugoslavian government after 1948. At the same time they constitute a record of Lebl’s life, a description of the most important and the most dramatic experiences, closely connected with the political situation in the country; experiences which for many years have been neglected in historical analyses and treated superficially. It seems that such lengthy exclusion of private history might have been a direct impulse which made Lebl undertake the research on the history of Jews in Yugoslavia. One of the hopes born from broadly understood feminist research is the possibility to “write women’s history”. It does not mean rewriting the whole history anew, but rather giving women back their proper position of subjects in history (Elior, 2014, p. 36). Thus, in my work I want to draw attention to the “inconspicuous texts” (cf. Strzelczyk, 2009)¹¹ by Ženi Lebl, which bring a new quality to the conventionally understood story of the past.

“I will write when I can, not when I would like”: the occupation of Belgrade

The first of the discussed texts, *Dnevnik jedne Judite*, is a collection of reports told in the form of a diary, presenting the fate of one family in Belgrade from 24 March to 11 December 1941. The author of the notes is the eponymous “certain Judith”, a wife and mother, who describes the struggles of her loved ones in occupied Belgrade during World War II. Initially, the collected entries are regularly jotted down on a daily basis, but later – due to the difficulties of the war – at longer intervals (“I can’t write to you every day. Please

¹¹ See also *Twórczość niepozorna*, 2015.

don't resent this. I will write when I can, not when I would like" Lebl, 1990a, p. 43¹²). They can be treated as a microscopic form of history and a subjective record of one Jewish family's experience against the backdrop of the co-called greater history, from which it is possible to decode a system of values and meanings held by the depicted community, and their personal interpretation of events (Domańska, 2005, p. 273).

The diary begins when Judith's husband is sent, probably for a month, to military field training. Her notes are directed at her husband, tenderly addressed as "Loni my love" (Lebl, 1990a, p. 17) or "dear Loni" (Ibidem, p. 23).¹³ As contact between the spouses will undoubtedly be limited or – even if it is not – then military censorship may intervene to make free exchange impossible, the woman decides to record the changes in their country and write down her thoughts in a notebook, which she intends to give to her husband upon his return. It dawns on Judith that the socio-political situation is rapidly changing ("Euphoria is gone and now all people are like taut strings waiting as it were for tomorrow's war to knock on our door too", Ibidem, p. 32¹⁴). If she cannot share her fears with her husband, she wants to feel his presence and closeness at least symbolically: "It's hard for me that I can't share my thoughts with you" (Ibidem, p. 23)¹⁵, "[...] how I wish you were now with us. Or that at least I knew where you are" (Ibidem, p. 61).¹⁶ With time, Loni's absence stretches until the outbreak of war in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia changes it into captivity. The diary then becomes not only a report for her husband, but above all, the means to gain perspective, a "mental oasis" and a mosaic of "scattered notes and reminiscences" (Ibidem, p. 43), which offers a momentary chance to catch one's breath. Writing and reading literature offer Judith a sanctuary, which does not allow her to give in to despair and abandon hope, and which props her up, enabling her to support her family: "Books have become my only friends. I don't have any new, I re-read the old ones, looking for new

¹² "Ne mogu da nastavim da ti pišem svakodnevno. Nemoj mi zameriti. Pisaću kad mogu, ne kad hoću".

¹³ "Loni mili moj", "Dragi Loni".

¹⁴ "Prošla je euforija, i sad su svi kao zategnute strune, kao da nešto iščekuju, kao da će sutra rat da zakuca i na naša vrata".

¹⁵ "Teško mi je što ne mogu da podelim misli s tobom".

¹⁶ "[...] toliko bih volela da si sad pored nas. Ili da bar znam gde si".

meaning in them or in myself. I turn the boring pages just like people turn their eyes from us” (Ibidem, p. 101).¹⁷ Increasingly frightened with each passing day by the worsening situation in the country and disappointed by the people around her, who make it clear to her that they do not want to deal with a Jewess in their midst, Judith finds that writing the diary permits her to create a minimal space of freedom for herself where she can articulate the emotions she normally hides from her children (Ibidem, p. 43). The last entry appears on the day when she receives a personal summons to report to Sajmište camp. Judith, unsure of what she will face in the ghetto and what the living conditions will be, decides to give the diary to her neighbour Dari for safekeeping.

In the introduction to *Dnevnik... Ženi Lebl*, the real author of the text, who can be described as a “mediator between the past and the present” (Domańska, 2005, pp. 274–275), confesses that the name of Judith is a cover name for her mother Ana Lebl. Being one of the victims of the German extermination policy, Ana – like many other people – lost her life in a gas van. It is to her and to all those victims of ethnic cleansing who were deprived of even a symbolic tomb that Ženi Lebl dedicates her book (Lebl, 1990a, p. 5). The diary thus becomes a particular form of memorial or a place of memory (see *Les lieux de memoire*, 1984–1992), which influences the process of interpreting the future. The anonymity and heroism of the victims, who like Ženi Lebl’s mother fought during the war for the survival of their families, were meaningfully represented by the phrase “one Judith”, which refers to the Biblical story of Judith and the history of the Israeli town of Bethulia. The town was besieged by an Assyrian army and suffered a heavy death toll and famine in its wake. When the defenders started contemplating surrender, help was offered by beautiful Judith. The woman went to the enemy camp, seduced the Assyrian general Holofernes and killed him. Having lost their leader, the soldiers withdrew and Judith became a heroine among her people (*The Book of Judith*, 1990, pp. 467–470). In the introduction to the diary, Ženi Lebl also stresses that her text, created less than 50 years after the tragic demise of the Jewish community in Serbia, is an expression of protest against all public attempts to deny the disaster that was meted out to the Jews in Yugoslavia (see Тулибрк, 2011, pp. 83–104). From this perspective it seems

¹⁷ “Knjige su mi ostale skoro jedini prijatelji. Nema novih, čitam stare ponovo, tražim novi smisao u njima ili u meni. Okrećem nezanimljive stranice, kao što ljudi okreću od nas svoje poglede”.

that Ženi Lebl, who devoted many years of her life to fighting to maintain the memory of Yugoslavian Jews, can also be considered as a symbolic Judith. Consciously and consistently, till the end of her days, Lebl worked as an independent researcher documenting the richness of the history and culture of Yugoslavian Jews, despite the hostile socio-political climate prevailing at the time.

Besides other reasons to choose this medium, the diary lends itself as a literary form used to describe events as it is particularly appropriate for recording current events in chronological order (Głowiński, 2002, p. 118). Additional information on how Lebl's diary came into being can be found in the 1998 autobiographical collection of memories by Ženi Lebl *Pitom shona, pitom acheret (Suddenly Different, Suddenly Another*, Serbian 2008 edition – *Odjednom drukčija, odjednom druga*). In a sense, in this collection the author expands chronologically on her memories from the time of World War II. In this way Lebl wants to confirm the authenticity of the events originally recorded in *Dnevnik...* What is more, among these memories the reader can find information that the author's mother did in fact keep a diary during the occupation of Belgrade that she wanted to give to her husband (Lebl, 2008, p. 47). Ženi recalls that writing offered her mother a kind of sanctuary. The mother tried very hard to keep her violent emotions in check and, in her daughter's opinion, when these pent-up emotions needed to be released, she reached for a pen. Ženi was of the opinion that sometimes the transmission of her mother's thoughts to paper was no longer about writing down events for her father, but more about her mother calming her own thoughts, rationalizing her difficult situation, thinking over and discussing – even if only in internal dialogue mode – what to do and how to cope with everyday life that kept changing dramatically: “In reality Mom was writing to Dad, but it seemed to me that it was more like she was conducting a dialogue with herself” (Ibidem, p. 47).¹⁸ Ženi also communicates that after receiving the summons to Sajmište, her mother handed the diary over to a neighbour, Lepša Dimitrijević, accompanied by a letter to her husband. Before the handover of the letter, the mother asked her daughter to read it. In *Odjednom drukčija...* Ženi tries to recreate the letter's content. Her memories and imagination create an unusual testi-

¹⁸ “U stvari, Mama je pisala Tati, ali sam ja imala utisak da je ona više vodila dialog sa samom sobom”.

mony – “a trustworthy symbolic-aesthetic archive” (Kłańska, 2015, p. 15), which constitutes an intimate record of her feelings of fear, pain and disappointment, but also her unflinching belief that the war would be over and the family would reunite. Products of artistic and literary imagination representing the experiences of Shoah victims are frequently preferred over more historical documentation, as the former are able to awaken empathy and convey the emotions involved. In describing the process of imagination in the context of women’s memory of Shoah, a process in which one is forced to exceed one’s perceptual habits and expand one’s current frameworks of meanings to discover new areas of experience, Dorota Głowacka introduces the concept of “compassionate imagination” (cf. Głowacka, 2015, pp. 163–178). This term seems an excellent reflection of the strategy applied by Ženi Lebl to describe the reality of occupation from her mother’s perspective. Lebl decided to abandon a reportage style in favour of literary rendering of the memory of traumatic events. Furthermore, by symbolically giving voice to her mother, the author removed herself to the margins. Despite the fact that it is she who is actually conveying the memory, its conveyance through an intermediary does not lower the authentic value of the testimony. It should be mentioned that Ana Lebl believed until the end that Sajmište camp would be just a place of temporary stay, and that in her new surroundings she would be able to continue keeping the diary; this is why she decided to take a blank notebook to the camp (Lebl, 2008, pp. 99–100). When Ženi returned to Belgrade after the end of the war, she tried to regain contact with her neighbour and retrieve her mother’s notes. As it turned out, Lepša Dimitrijević died in the bombing of Belgrade in 1944, and the diary vanished without a trace (Ibidem, p. 179).¹⁹

In the history of Serbian literature, a diary is one of the dominant genres in women’s prose. According to Magdalena Koch, “next to a letter, a diary is the second important medium of intimist prose” among modernist writers (Koch,

¹⁹ It is worth mentioning that the history of Serbian literature has a similar case of reconstructing notes from memory and these in turn becoming the basis of a literary work. It was a modified 1919 epistolary novel *Kaluđer iz Rusije* [*A Monk from Russia*] by Milica Janković. This novel was created using the correspondence of the main female character with a monk, reconstructed from memories. When the heroine fell ill – apparently terminally – she burned all the letters. She did not want anybody to have access to her intimate thoughts after her death. When she unexpectedly recovered, she decided to use these “cremated” letters as the building blocks of her tale. See Koch, 2007, p. 148.

2007, p. 158). Furthermore, as an autobiographical form, a diary is commonly considered to be characteristic of female authors' expression (cf. e.g. Ritz, 2000, p. 49). However, as noted by Aleksandra Ubertowska, in reference to the conclusions of Marlene Heinemann from her research on the literature of the Holocaust, it was only the war and the resulting internal compulsion to write down testimonies that allowed women to break the cultural prohibition of publishing autobiographical texts. Earlier “[...] according to Western European bourgeois cultural norms, the autobiography as a published book was not really a form of expression open to women as it involved exposing one's I, with particular exhibitionism” (Ubertowska, 2009, p. 224). The growth in the number of published personal documents by women in the war and post-war periods is an effect of the degradation of egocentrism as a feature of autobiographic writing. In this case, one can speak about the influence of women's social role making their own I subordinate to the needs of other people (Ibidem, pp. 224–225).

Judith from Ženi Lebl's *Dnevnik...* is on the one hand primarily a wife and mother for whom family and motherhood are a social *sacrum* (Brzóstowicz, 1998, p. 10). She devotes a lot of space in her diary to describing the trials and tribulations of particular family members, amplified by the war. Female territory is a space in which a social role is fulfilled and in which female experience traditionally took place (Dąbrowska, 2004, p. 31). The reader thus finds about the difficulties encountered by her son Miško at the beginning of his studies after the introduction of the *Numerus clausus* rule. The regulations that followed forced him to work for the German occupiers, often in life-threatening circumstances such as those after an ammunition explosion in the Smederevo fort on 5 June 1941, when the death toll was approximately 2500. The visibly deteriorating situation for the men makes the mother – as I have already noted in the introduction – see no other option but to decide to have her son provided with false identity papers and to send him abroad: “He is smart, so let him cope on his own. He is young, so let him earn his piece of bread. He was afraid that something would happen to us when he escaped. It was my role to convince him to take this step and enable him to get false papers. May God help him!” (Lebl, 1990a, p. 108).²⁰

²⁰ “Pametan je, pa neka se snađe. Mlad je, pa neka zaradi svoju koru hleba. Bojao se da će se nama nešto dogoditi ako on pobegne. Moje je bilo da ga nagovorim na taj korak i omogućim mu da dobije lažne papire. Neka mu je Bog u pomoći!”

With a certain surprise, Judith also describes the process of transformation she is observing in her teenage daughter Rašela, who is changing from a little girl to a young woman, which makes the mother happy but also justifiably worried. Rašela is maturing and becoming a person garnering the interest of boys, who start appearing in her company, and can help in difficult times, for example with obtaining food. Yet what is much more surprising is the internal transformation which takes place within the daughter, who not only becomes politically involved and sneaks out to the meetings of young communists, but also publicly and openly vents her opinions during anti-Semitic persecutions, defending the good name of the Lebl family: “I am more scared by this unexpected change in Rašela, by this outpouring of words and proud, dignified posture [...]” (Ibidem, p. 58),²¹ “The process of breaking the chain of human anger and stupidity has begun in her the process of forming this young being over the abyss and twilight of humanity” (Lebl, 1990a, p. 61).²² Rašela does not let her mother wash the Star of David somebody has chalked on the entrance gate to their home, and when they are asked to leave a shop, she cheekily retorts to the shop assistant: “Did you sell these bones and offal to us for a good price? I haven’t heard that you were one of the philanthropists who help orphans...” (Ibidem, p. 74).²³ Almost before the words are out of her mouth her mother leads her outside. Another time, when accosted in the street, she angrily, without mincing her words, shouts out her feelings to a childhood friend when the latter does not accept an invitation to Rašela’s home: “Haven’t you noticed that we are made from the same material, you Arians and we Jews, made from blood, meat and soul... do you hear: from soul too!” (Ibidem, p. 58).²⁴ The mother notices that all such incidents make the daughter feel even more alienated²⁵, causing deep hurt, which

²¹ “Više se bojim tog iznenadnog preokreta kod Rašele, onog izliva reči i ponosnog, dostojanstvenog držanja [...]”.

²² “Počeo je kod nje proces kidanja lanaca ljudske zlobe i gluposti, proces uzdizanja tog mladog bića iznad ponora i sutona čovečnosti”.

²³ “Zar one kosti i creva koje ste nam prodavali za dobre pare? Nisam čula da ste bili među filantropima koji su pomagali sirotinju...”

²⁴ “Zar nisi primetila da smo od iste sirovine sazdani vi arijevci i mi Jevreji, od krvi i mesa i duše... Čuj: i od duše!”.

²⁵ Rašela recalls like Ženi Lebl that their greatest friend during the occupation of Belgrade was their dog Ledi. She was faithful to the Lebl family and did not leave the house although they tried to chase her away so that she would forage for herself. Ledi was ultimately shot by a Gestapo man when she tried to stop him from entering the house (see Lebl, 1990a, pp. 116–117).

is reflected in the poems the girl writes and which the mother discovers, guided by maternal concern (Ibidem, p. 60). Judith feels that her daughter's behaviour stems from a wish to show support to her mother, yet she realizes that in wartime a carelessly uttered sentence may cause her death. Thus the mother sometimes withdraws, not wanting to offend the daughter as she realizes that this is also very hard for the girl. There are also moments when the daughter's rebellion takes the form of acts of courage, which move Judith especially deeply. When Rašela manages to get bread for the family yet again, the mother is full of admiration: “Look how this girl behaves in a difficult situation: it is a veritable miracle” and jokingly calls her “the minister of foreign affairs” (Ibidem, p. 75).²⁶

From the point of view of a female form of narration, the relationship between the spouses described in the diary is the most interesting. The dominant tone of the feelings emerging from Judith's words takes the form of abovementioned tender addresses to her husband and multiple repetitions of sentences revealing her fear concerning his fate, as for a long time there is no news from him. Judith speaks to Loni in her thoughts: “If you read my thoughts and wishes, send a word” (Ibidem, p. 33).²⁷ Meanwhile, the war starts and there is still no news from the husband. Finally, after two months a brief letter comes informing her that he is alive, healthy and imprisoned in Germany. The whole family breathed a deep sigh of relief. Judith takes it upon herself to do everything in her power to prevent her beloved husband from knowing how difficult their situation in Belgrade is. Although they are hungry themselves,²⁸ have problems with access to water and former friends have turned away, she does everything to put together a package for her husband: “We have to cope somehow here; we will tighten our belts, but you won't feel it” (Ibidem, p. 73).²⁹ In letters to him, she consciously softens the descriptions of the conditions they live in, and when she wants to tell him what she really thinks and feels, she reaches for the diary and writes: “I'm writing these sen-

²⁶ “Kako se ta devojčica ponaša u ovoj teškoj situaciji – to ti je pravo čudo”.

²⁷ “Ako čitaš moje misli i želje – javi se”.

²⁸ Judith notes the moment when horsemeat started to be sold in Belgrade, see Lebl, 1990a, p. 74. The appearance of horsemeat in Poland and the belief held by some people that a horse was a friend and helper prevented some of them from eating this meat. This is described by Aleksandra Zaprutko-Janicka, see Zaprutko-Janicka, 2015, pp. 165–168.

²⁹ “Moramo nekako da se snađemo, mi ovde; odvajaćemo od usta, ali ti to nećeš osetiti”.

tences to maintain a sense of normality. In these rare and general letters to you, instead of describing the real situation I have to make it less harsh, to lie” (Ibidem, p. 101).³⁰ What is interesting however, is that Judith’s notes are not entirely uncritical. In the early parts of the diary, created just after her husband’s departure to military training, she tries to express gently that she has not been satisfied with their relationship so far. Before the war, her husband worked outside Belgrade, as the manager of two mines in Milićevi and Brđani, so he spent most of his time away from home. He surfaced in Belgrade only at weekends so that he was not a fully-functioning member of their family life, with Judith somewhat ironically referring to him as a “K.G.”, from the words “kao gost” (“like a guest”). The wife clearly realizes that her husband’s work is certainly not easy and that he is not happy about staying away for long stretches of time. She still firmly believes that when Loni returns home, a frank talk about this issue and a fresh discussion about his “constant absence” will take place (Lebl, 1990a, pp. 17–18).

The domestic sphere, however, is not the only space visited by Judith in her diary entries. Although she is not an activist in any organizations, she is very knowledgeable about all the social and political changes afoot and tries to keep up to date with them. Her tale interestingly unites concepts traditionally separated in women’s history, that of “the private” and “the public”. These terminological road signs “[...] help to understand the particulars of this non-continuous – deprived of ordered narration – experience in which women have participated from the earliest days” (Iwasiów, 2008, p. 7). The line clearly demarcating these two spheres is blurred in Judith’s diary and it does not follow a stereotypical course. Judith meticulously notes all the changes occurring in Yugoslavia³¹ and in the world that are reported by the media. To do this,

³⁰ “Pišem ove redove da bih ostala normalna. U onim retkim i šturim pismima tebi umesto da pišem o stvarnom stanju stvari, moram da ublažujem, da lažem”.

³¹ The changes take place not only in the political domain but also in Belgrade as a city, such as the demolition of a bridge on the Sava near Sajmište and the construction of a pontoon bridge (Lebl, 1990a, p. 47). The expressiveness in her descriptions of the bombed Yugoslavian capital may resemble a symbolic series of works *Zamordowane miasto* [*A Murdered City*] by Maria Hiszpańska-Neumann depicting Warsaw after the 1944 uprising (see Maciąg, 2015, pp. 277–288). Judith also quotes information on acts of sabotage (Lebl, 1990a, pp. 88–89) and stories told with disbelief among Belgrade inhabitants, such as the one about a medical student and German agent Egon Sabukošek (Sabukoschek, Lebl, 1990a, pp. 63–67; see also Божовић, 2012, pp. 72–74).

she listens to the radio³² and follows the papers, reading first the *Politika* and later the propagandist *Novo vreme* and *Obnova*: “They are trying to show that the situation is normalizing, that everything is in order and Radio Belgrade is broadcasting, cinemas are open and there are horse races... Will these representatives of our fourth power have enough courage to look honest people in the eyes?” (Lebl, 1990a, p. 69).³³ She approaches all information critically and thoughtfully,³⁴ yet right up until the last moment she hopes that German culture will not stoop to mass crime although she has experienced several cases of “human bestiality”. She illustrates this with two situations: when she is forced to clean toilets in German flats and offices with her bare hands and to wipe a German soldier’s boots with her own scarf. She also saw with her own eyes the Nazis robbing jewellery of their victims or taking pictures of themselves with the bodies of murdered people (Ibidem, p. 51). The diary’s aim is to provide information for her husband upon his return, so she also collects press cuttings and announcements of orders issued by the Germans. In addition, in her narration she includes quotations to illustrate her notes: “Let there at least be a record somewhere of what we are experiencing” (Ibidem, p. 69).³⁵

Judith’s diary is a record of an experience viewed by her daughter from the distance of time. This account reveals a particular kind of testimony in which the changes generated by the war are perceived as historical events, influencing not only the world’s geopolitical situation but also the fates of the author and her family. Although the husband’s absence is the motivating factor behind Judith’s decision to write and has a significant influence on her emotional state, the author focuses on factual representation, primarily of war

³² The family find about the outbreak of war from the radio. Rašela manages to tune the receiver to Radio London, which aired a broadcast in Serbian on 6 April, preceded by the hymn *Bože pravde* [*God of Justice*] (see Lebl, 1990a, p. 34).

³³ “Trude se da prikažu kako se situacija normalizuje, sve je u redu, radi Radio-Beograd, bioskopi, održavaju se konjske trke... Da li će ovi nasi dični predstavnici sedme sile smeti da pogledaju poštenim ljudima u oči?”

³⁴ Judith reports with great sorrow on finding the name of Pavle Bihali in a published list. Bihali founded the Nolit publishing house in 1928 and was executed by firing squad on 19th July 1941 (Lebl, 1990a, pp. 83–85). It is worth remembering that it was only after Bihali’s recommendation in 1934 that the novel *Kajin put* [*Kaja’s Road*] by Milka Žicina was published. Žicina was the future author of accounts from Glavnjača prison and Stolac camp – *Samu* [*Alone*] (Београд: Службени гласник, 2009) and *Sve, sve, sve* [*Everything, Everything, Everything*] (Zagreb: Prosvjeta, 2002).

³⁵ “Neka bar negde bude zapisano ono što sad doživljavamo”.

and how it has transformed her ordinary everyday world by contributing to her loss of stability. The reader's attention is drawn to fragments which display the intellectual and artistic character of the entries through the inclusion of English (Ibidem, p. 96) and French phrases (Ibidem, p. 113) as well as metaphorical comparisons describing the heroine's everyday strife: "Every outing into the city is for me like walking through an «open space», through the field where the winds of fear, doubt, sorrow and loneliness blow" (Ibidem, p. 43).³⁶

"Shameful history pages must be written down": a report from Goli otok camp³⁷

In *Ljubičica bela* the initiative to report the story belongs from the start to the author, Ženi Lebl, who places herself at the heart of events. We meet Ženi in 1949 as a twenty-something woman who lives in Belgrade and works for the *Politika* magazine. Introducing herself, the heroine reminisces about the period of World War II and the death of her mother and grandmother in death vans. She also recollects the fate of her father – who survived because he was imprisoned in a camp abroad – and the fate of her brother, whom the family were able to send out of Yugoslavia in 1941, later to take up arms in the war of liberation. Ženi survived the turbulent wartime period because – as she writes – she encountered kind people who offered her a helping hand. She hid her Jewish origins, which allowed her to survive deportation to a camp in Germany under the name of Jovanka Lazić.

After the war she starts working for a newspaper. One day the editor's office was entered by two men, who, without any explanation, arrest our heroine and lock her in Glavnjača prison. During the following four months Ženi is interrogated and her interrogators try to force her to admit her guilt. We see Ženi attempting to analyse the events of her life recorded in her memory, but she cannot identify the alleged crimes she is accused of. When she finally learns the reason for her imprisonment, she is incredulous. Slavica Garonja Rado-

³⁶ "Svaki izlazak u grad osećam kao kretanje po «brisanom prostoru», ledini po kojoj duvaju košave straha, sumnje, tuge i samoće".

³⁷ "[...] sramne stranice istorije treba da budu zapisane [...]", Lebl, 1990b, p. 9.

vanac calls this scene the culmination of the text (Гароња Радованац, 2011, p. 667). Lebl broke the law because, while at work, she repeated a joke she heard from her colleague Vojo Đukić. The joke referred to Marshal Tito: “Yugoslavia received the grand prize at an international flower exhibition as they bred a one-hundred-kilogram white violet” (Lebl, 1990b, p. 15).³⁸ “Ljubičica bela” means “white violet” and it comes from songs celebrating the marshal, such as *Druže Tito* and *Ljubičice bijela* [*Comrade Tito, The White Violet*]. The white violet is an epithet denoting Tito.³⁹ The colleague who told the joke was working for the state authorities and the apparently accidental meeting with him turned out to be a setup.⁴⁰ Unaware of the trap, Lebl repeated the joke when the correct response would have been to report the man who dared joke about the marshal. Without a trial she is branded as an enemy of the nation and sentenced to a year of imprisonment “for slander against the nation and the state” (Lebl, 1990b, p. 58).⁴¹ Paradoxically, as Garonja Radovanac writes, at the moment of her arrest Lebl was: “[...] clearly anti-Stalinist and an exemplary member of Tito’s youth party as well as the greatest supporter of the Party’s ideas [KPJ, Komunistička partija Jugoslavije, The Communists Party of Yugoslavia]; as she was a [representative] of the youthful employees of *Politika* and one of their most talented journalists, a promising career awaited her” (Гароња Радованац, 2011, p. 666).⁴² Ženi is eventually transported to Ramski rit camp, where she works building a canal. Later she is incarcerated in Zabela prison, and finally transported on board a Punat ship onto Sveti Grgur to be later moved to Goli otok. The original sentence of one year imprisonment is ultimately extended into a traumatic two-and-a-half-year-long stay on the islands.

³⁸ “Jugoslavija je dobila prvu nagradu na međunarodnoj izložbi cveća, jer je odgajila ljubičicu belu od 100 kilograma”.

³⁹ It should be highlighted that this floristic phrase references a particular kind of violet, that is, the white violet. In this case it can both allude to the image of Tito as and elegant man in a white uniform and to the uniqueness of the Marshal’s character, as for example in Poland the white violet is on the *Red List of Polish Plants and Funghi*, where it is classified as extinct.

⁴⁰ Mihailo Simić informs us that Ženi deeply loved the man who told her the joke and they were considered to be an item (Simić, 2013, p. 67). The writer herself stressed in her report that although Đukić adored her, she was never serious about him (Lebl, 1990b, p. 11).

⁴¹ “Zbog klevete protiv naroda i države”.

⁴² „[...] изразити антистаљиниста и у правом смислу Титова омладинка и највећи заговорник идеја Партије (КПЈ), а као млади кадар *Политике*, једно од њених најталентованијих новинарских пера, пред којом је стајала велика каријера”.

For many years, the issue of Yugoslavian communist prison camps was absent from discussions in Yugoslavian society and abroad. A breakthrough came only in the late 1980s, after the death of Josif Broz Tito, when the memoirs of former inmates presenting their experiences from the camps started to appear.⁴³ Nonetheless, there is still a lack of studies analysing these literary representations.⁴⁴ A significant change in the study of prison camp literature is underway in texts using gender as a starting point, in which women's accounts are analysed with regard to typically female experiences, different from those presented in men's testimonies (cf. Jambrešić-Kirin, 2007, 2009b, 2010, 2014; Гароња Радованац 2011, 2012; Taczyńska, 2014c,d, 2015). Although the narratives of Milka Žicina (*Sve, sve, sve*, 2002; *Sama*, 2009) should be considered to be the first written female prison reports, we must remember that it is the memoirs of Ženi Lebl which are the first published testimony of a former female prisoner (see Taczyńska, 2014c,d).⁴⁵

Ženi Lebl outlines the reasons why she decided to write her memoirs down in *Umesto uvoda (Instead the Foreword)* for *Ljubičica...* The author stresses there that the critical factor was the need to give testimony: “[...] I wouldn't write about Glavnjača, Ramski Rit camp, Zabela (VIII pavilon), the two sides of Sveti Grgur island or Goli otok camp, if it was a well-known matter, described, poetized and worked through. But it isn't like that. Hundreds of women who went there and went through these places, are silent and feel fear even today, forty or

⁴³ The researchers of this topic describe the 1980s as the time of a genuine “flood” (Jasna Dragović-Soso) or “explosion” (Oskar Gruenwald) of critical works and artistic projects about prison camps. See Dragović-Soso, 2004, p. 128; Gruenwald, 1987, p. 519. As for earlier attempts to introduce the topic of prison camps into literature, see Scheffler, 1984, pp. 352–377; Kadić, 1978, pp. 91–106; Kadić, 1988, pp. 238–254; Gruenwald, 1987, pp. 513–528.

⁴⁴ It must be mentioned that in 1994 a monograph *Non cogito ergo sum. Arheologija jedne šale [Non cogito ergo sum. Archeology of a Joke]* was published in Lublana by a Slovenian anthropologist Božidar Jezernik. The monograph is also known in Poland (see Jezernik, 1994, Polish edition – 2013). It is the first study in which the author provides a detailed description of the reality of life in a prison camp on the basis of numerous memoirs of former inmates, both male and female. However, although Jezernik uses reminiscences, he does not study them as texts, considering them instead to be a source of fact-based material which he uses to recreate the camp structure and the way it operated.

⁴⁵ In prison camp discourse, apart from Lebl's text, other memoirs written by women had to wait for a long time to be included in research on the Goli otok prison camp experience.

more years later” (Lebl, 1990b, p. 8).⁴⁶ An important factor, motivating women to write their memoirs almost 40 years after leaving the camp, was the need to draw attention to the fact that in communist camps there were not only men but also women. When Lebl became aware of the fact that increasingly often those who were speaking about Goli otok prison camp were not first-hand witnesses but people with merely second-hand knowledge of camp reality, and that nobody even mentioned women’s presence in the prison camp, she decided to break the silence (Lebl, 1990b, p. 6). She consciously opposed the prevailing male narrative, which marginalized women’s memory of the camps. It is worth mentioning that the direct stimulus and inspiration for creating this text came from Danilo Kiš, who filmed a documentary series *Goli život* [*Naked Life*] in 1989. The protagonists of the documentary are two victims of Yugoslavian camps – Ženi Lebl and Eva Panić-Nahir.⁴⁷ Not only is *Goli život* the first documentary focusing mainly on the Goli otok camp but the film also confirmed that women too were prisoners in the camps for those who supported Cominform. It also demanded that women’s voices should be added to any analysis regarding Goli otok camp (cf. Taczyńska 2014a,d). Furthermore, Kiš was the person who convinced Ženi to write down her memoirs and publish them in the form of a book. This book was enhanced by the inclusion of documents confirming the facts she presented and a collection of 19 poems created between 1951 and 1954.

Let us look closer at the experiences described by the writer. Admission to the camp, involving a ritual crossing of the threshold of an infernal space, is synonymous with a full dissociation from the world outside as a female prisoner becomes yet another depersonalized cog in the prison machine. Each of the female inmates enters an entirely new world, one organized to carry out a program of dehumanization. Female prisoners are soon exposed to the strictly hierarchical structures in which these prisons are run. The women come under the authority of camp guards. It is the guards who decide the inmates’

⁴⁶ “[...] ne bih pisala o Glavnjači, Ramskom Ritu, Zabeli (VIII paviljon), dve strane ostrva Sveti Grgur i Golom otoku da je to stvar znana, opisana, opevana, prežaljena. Ali ona to nije. Stotine žena koje su kroz njih, kroz sva ta mesta, prošle – čute, osećaju strah i danas, posle četrdeset i više godina”.

⁴⁷ Totalitarian systems, prison camps and gulags had an important place in the thoughts of Kiš, an eminent Yugoslavian intellectual and writer of Jewish origin. Yet only after a visit to Israel and meeting the former women prisoners of the communist camps – Ženi Lebl and Eva Panić-Nahir – did the author decide to join the discussion regarding Goli otok camp and film a documentary series.

fate, demarcate the borders of their new existence and determine the paradigm of human behaviour. Thus, after experiencing the first shock, one ought to learn this unwritten rulebook of behaviour and fully submit to it. However, the island is also governed by a second hierarchy, one involving the introduction of almost caste-like divisions among the inmates which very quickly become immutable. The women incarcerated on the island are split into three groups: the “band”, the “activists” and the “brigade”.⁴⁸ Each of them is assigned appropriate tasks, and one’s assignment to a particular level involves certain privileges – or lack thereof. Initially, one joins the “band”. Women from this “rabble” should be boycotted: no one can talk to them and any form of communication is forbidden. The worst tasks are reserved for them, and as for a place to sleep, the “bandits” are allowed to occupy only the floor under the beds. The situation for “activists” – women involved both in their everyday work and in cooperating with the camp authorities – is different. They are permitted to receive better clothes and are afforded the opportunity to sleep on the lower bunks of the beds. The term “cooperating with the authorities” is one which requires further explanation. This cooperation is one of the memories Lebl finds most painful to recall. Prisoners were expected to collaborate with the authorities and report any “disloyal” utterances and events in the camp. If no such situations were forthcoming, then it was expected that they should be provoked so as to unmask hostile attitudes. In practice, as the author writes, continuous mutual suspicions were created and a sense of permanent mistrust among the inmates was rife. It was nearly impossible to find a prisoner who could be trusted and treated as a confidante, as any contact was always burdened by the tension arising from the realization that “If I don’t report someone, someone will certainly report me” (Lebl, 1990b, p. 100). Another script was impossible. Breaking prisoner solidarity and convincing them that the path to freedom lay in listening and relaying information was paramount and

⁴⁸ In the literature concerning this issue one can find different names for the classes of prisoner and varying numbers as regards the division, yet the basic distinction between those who revised their views and those who were boycotted is always observed. For example, Ivo Banac divides inmates into three groups: the activists, or those who have been reformed (aktivisti [revidirici]), the passivists (pasivci) and the bandits (banditi) – see Banac, 1990, p. 236. Based on the recollections from the prisoner Milka Žicina, Mihailo Lalić splits the arrested into five classes (castes): the centre (centar), the activists (aktiv), the collective (kolektiv), those with postponed status (odloženi stav), and the boycotted (bojkotovani). See Лалић, 2011, p. 6.

is considered by Lebl to be the greatest and simultaneously the saddest triumph of camp authorities (Ibidem, p. 101). Denunciation caused a complete re-evaluation of the primary axiological system that gives people the ability to differentiate between good and evil. In the camp, this situation was turned on its head and the clear division into US and THEM disappeared: “Now “they” are also among us” (Ibidem, p. 79).⁴⁹ As a result, the creation of stable emotional bonds between prisoners was rare, and this lack of connectivity quickly led to internal desolation and moral regression.

The last of the mentioned prisoner groups was the “brigade”. All women in the camp aspired to be called “brigadists”, as this was the only position which made it possible to apply for release and return home. It was also unthinkable to jump any of the steps: each prisoner had to go through each circle of the camp hell while the guards of both genders egged on the women to accuse each other: “All is in your hands. We, through our magnanimity, are offering you a chance” (Lebl, 1990b, p. 106).⁵⁰

Ženi Lebl was among the first group of prisoners to set foot on the island. The primary task awaiting prisoners on their arrival was to build a place to sleep, first for the authorities and then for themselves. As the camp operated in seclusion, outside the social and political system of any of the republics of the Yugoslavian Federation, all necessary tasks had to be done by the prisoners themselves. These ranged from cooking, laying electric wires, cleaning cesspools right through to providing medical help. As the island was basically a rock,⁵¹ the main occupation of the inmates was working in the quarries.⁵² Every day prison groups left the camp in the morning for their workplace, where they were employed breaking stones with primitive tools. Construction materials and marble objects were then transported from the island to be sold both in the country itself and abroad. In the commercial register Goli otok was listed as “Velebit” enterprise (Jezernik, 1994, p. 140). Work on the

⁴⁹ “Sada je počelo i među nama da bude «onih»”.

⁵⁰ “Sve zavisi od tebe same. Mi ti pružamo mogućnost, mi smo velikodušni”.

⁵¹ The name of the island reflects its rocky nature of naked stone hills devoid of any plant life: Goli otok means Barren/Naked Island (see Marković, 1990, pp. 28–29).

⁵² Quarries are probably first mentioned as places of torture and punishment in *The History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides: in 413 BC when an Athenian military force tried to take control of Sicily. The expedition ended in disaster and the Athenian soldiers were sent to quarries. Also see e.g. Денић, 2005, p. 66.

island could also be used as an instrument of torture. Those boycotted were assigned the most exhausting and often the most pointless tasks. The prisoners were forced to perform Sisypheus-like tasks such as carrying stones from one place to another, digging holes and then filling them back in or carrying water to a bottomless barrel. Women who showed even a modicum of rebellious tendencies or behaviour such as expressing support for the Soviet Union were met with immediate reaction. The most drastic example of this mentioned in Ženi Lebl's account is that of Brana Marković, the wife of a mathematics professor, Sima Marković. Marković, one of the first secretaries of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (1920–1921)⁵³, was a victim of Stalinist repressions and was sentenced to 10 years of penal servitude in 1939. The date and place of his death remain unknown. His wife did not believe that Stalin had ruthlessly persecuted Yugoslavian communists (Marković, 1987, p. 184). In Lebl's reminiscences she is mentioned as a prisoner who was boycotted and subjected to a variety of punishments for the whole length of her stay in the camp, yet until the bitter end she refused to retract her support for the USSR. She detached herself entirely from her surrounding reality, showing no reaction to the voices of guards or fellow inmates. In the memories, Marković seems to be a unique character who was able to offer compassion and hope by her very demeanour, sometimes even just by a look or a single sentence. This is how Ženi Lebl describes her:

The sinner Brana Marković – they say she used to be a professor in the USSR – is now tasked with drawing seawater with a small bucket and carrying it to a barrel without a bottom, which she is to fill! Like in that folk saying about working in vain. The woman goes about her tasks, drawing, carrying, pouring water and then doing it all back again. She does not talk to anyone and you can't read from her face what she thinks or feels. They say "she has lost her marbles". If she's crazy, this work will finish her! But it seems to me that a few times, as if by chance, she looked at me like a human being, with

⁵³ In 1935 Marković, fearing repression from the Yugoslavian government, emigrated at the party's behest to the USSR. There he managed to gain significant authority among the revolutionaries as a theoretician specializing in nationality issues and political economy; writing under the pen-name of "Semić". Even Stalin himself argued with his hypotheses.

compassion, not in the way you would expect from a bandit (Lebl, 1990b, pp. 107–108).⁵⁴

An issue that must be analyzed in this article is the matter of awareness of the body, clearly emphasized in Lebl’s account. One of the first steps in the multi-staged process of degradation undertaken, which women felt particularly acutely, was the act of depriving them of their subjectivity, carried out by forcing them to don prison “uniforms”. Recounting how women were admitted to Ramski rit camp, Ženi Lebl highlights the moment when the prisoners were forced to dress in worn and dirty clothes, poorly fitting their shapes and sizes: “[The women there] were wearing some strange tawny cloth uniforms, and on their legs they had enormous rubber boots. Soon we too received new clothes [...]” (Lebl, 1990b, pp. 67–68).⁵⁵ Poorly fitting shoes – getting a pair of the correct size was a rarity – caused serious, painful wounds. Agnieszka Nikliborc, who studies the accounts of women from KL Auschwitz-Birkenau, stresses that the necessity of donning prison clothes blurred any distinctions among the women. The inmates were a part of a uniform mass and what used to constitute their identity – profession, social and economic standing – had entirely lost its value (see Nikliborc, 2010, p. 156). The prison garb conspired to deprive women of their uniqueness and individuality. In addition, as was previously the case for example in Nazi camps, clothes carried meaning, stigmatizing the prisoners. In the camps for Cominform members, the clothes one wore clearly indicated whether a given person was still being subjected to boycotting or whether she had already retracted her views. By putting on a prison uniform, a woman’s body became unequivocally marked. Notwithstanding the

⁵⁴ “Grešnica Brana Marković, vele da je bila profesor u SSSR-u, sad joj je zadatak da zahvata kofom morsku vodu i nosi je do bureta bez dna, koje treba da napuni! Ono što se kaže: iz šupljeg u prazno. Radi žena svoj posao, zahvata, nosi, sipa, pa opet sve nanovo. Ne govori ni sa kim, na licu joj se ne može pročitati šta misli, šta oseća. Kažu da je «s uma sišavša». Ako je stvarno sumanuta, ovaj će je posao dokrajčiti! Meni se ipak čini da me je nekoliko puta, onako u prolazu, pogledala ljudski, sažaljivo, ne onako kako bi trebalo na bandu gledati”. After leaving Goli otok camp, Brana Marković was unable to bear the burden of her experiences. She committed suicide on her mother’s grave in Belgrade. The story of Brana Marković – her stay in the camp and life after – is also described by Boško Mrđa, see Mrđa, 1995, pp. 6–10.

⁵⁵ “[žene] bile su u nekim čudnim uniformama od čoje, tamnomrkim, na nogama su imale ogromne gumene kondure. Uskoro smo i mi dobile nova odela [...]”.

everyday dangers of prison camp life – women prisoners were permanently reminded of their bodies, which created a significant part of their identity.

In *Ljubičica*... the reader can find many fragments referring to the biological and sexual dimensions of women imprisoned in the camp (see Karwowska, 2009, p. 5). First and foremost, it should be pointed out that in Lebl's account awareness of the body is described as the central problem of functioning in this new reality. Subsequent descriptions show that living in camps, women lost power over their own bodies on a daily basis. The first aspect that characterizes the body is physiology. In *Glavnjača*, women shared a cell with several other inmates. This state of affairs quickly forced Lebl to divest herself of any sense of shame and relieve herself in full view of others (Lebl, 1990b, p. 55). Living conditions deteriorated further when our heroine worked at a canal construction site, where all day long the women were forced to do drudging work all the while standing knee-deep in water. As a consequence, they had to become accustomed to being continuously attacked by leeches. Also, the water they were wading in was the only "liquid" refreshment available to quench their thirst. To add insult to the injuries being inflicted upon the women was the fact that all of them were forced to work in the ditches all day long without a break, so the canal they were building constituted not only their source of drinkable water but also the place where they relieved themselves. Lebl sums up the described situation with a brief commentary, which returns oftentimes in her account when describing everyday life in prison: "A man can get used to anything" (these words can be heard as a ghastly refrain of camp life in many memoir texts).

Lebl returns to the issues of physiology when she describes her time on the island. The ubiquitous filth initially disgusts all prisoners, and our protagonist recalls her life in Belgrade and reflects on issues related to her bodily functions. She remembers that toilet paper exists, yet for the inmates on the island this remains nothing but a hazy memory; however – as Lebl adds – "We got used to this, like when everyone has eaten garlic and nobody can smell it. And we all here reek" (Ibidem, p. 102).⁵⁶ The disastrous sanitary conditions prevailing make it impossible to maintain proper hygiene.

⁵⁶ "Privikle smo se već i na to, kao kad se svi najedu belog luka pa ga niko i ne oseća. A mi ovde sve smrdimo".

Thus, the body begins to alter even more markedly with subsequent infections and illnesses leaving permanent, visible and disfiguring marks. Malnourishment also has a dehumanizing influence as it takes away earlier womanly curves. Furthermore, through beatings and working beyond human capacity, they begin to feel as if they are losing their female identity and their sense of “being a woman”. In the camp a “spiritual” life hardly exists and conversations are forbidden; thus the body takes on the role of a medium communicating with the world, directly influencing women’s actions. Once feelings of de-feminization and reification are awakened, the process is irreversible. It is worth mentioning that this sense of femininity is defined in reference to categories from the outside world, primarily to visual signs of beauty. Lebl mentions several times in her memoir that she had been adored by men, a state she liked because it made her feel attractive. Now she recounts how she is beginning to feel loathing towards her own emaciated and mistreated body. This poignant perception of herself makes her stop perceiving her body as an object of sexual desire. From this perspective, it is interesting to look at the fragment of the memoir in which Ženi Lebl recreates a situation of sexual abuse based on her own experience: “He took me in his arms, delicately laying me down on the bedding and kissing my tear-streaked face and dead fingers. Then, he started pulling off my work uniform [...] I feel him, I feel his rapid breath and when he reaches the culmination of pleasure, my hands start to burn” (Lebl, 1990b, p. 86).⁵⁷ The woman paradoxically defends herself against suffering and experiencing the forced intercourse on a deeper level by perceiving herself as an asexual being. This is why after having been raped, Lebl just adds laconically: “We are so lucky that we have stopped being womanly creatures [...]” (Lebl, 1990b, p. 87).⁵⁸ To escape any suffering from this experience seems nigh impossible. As Rhonda Copelon writes: “Every rape is a grave violation of physical and mental integrity” (quoted after Goldenberg, 2007, p. 159). However, Lebl seems not to feel what has just happened, and she limits information about the sexual act to the absolute minimum. She practically dismisses the occurrence by devoting

⁵⁷ “Uzeo me je u naručje. Nežno me je položio na postelju i ljubeći mi uplakano lice i mrtve prste počeo da svlači s mene robijašku uniformu. [...] Osećam ga, osećam mu ubrzano disanje, i dok on dolazi do kulminacije zadovoljenja, meni počinju da gore ruke”.

⁵⁸ “Kakva sreća što smo prestale da budemo ženska stvorenja [...]”.

a mere few sentences to it in the whole text. One might suspect that Lebl speaks about the rape only because she had decided earlier that her account would be honest. She is drawn by a journalistic compulsion to meticulously preserve all events in her story, if possible. Yet, there can be another reason why Lebl devotes so little space to the rape. Texts referring to memories from the Shoah again turn out to be helpful in understanding the author's intentions. Having analysed rich critical bibliography connected with the Shoah, Myrna Goldenberg notices that for a long time, rape and sexuality in general had been considered an insignificant part of history, thus the topic is absent from many studies (Goldenberg, 2007, p. 162). Still, Goldenberg has no doubts that without including fragments outlining the violence perpetrated against women, the presented history will be only a partial picture of war, limited solely to a socially accepted version. Such an approach thus bears the risk of cognitive reductionism towards the issue. Recent years have brought numerous changes in the field of breaking down barriers concerning the wartime fates of women, above all in literature and film, although many stories still require re-interpretation and appropriate analysis.

Perhaps Lebl does not decide to delve deeper into acts of rape because she does not see them as a topic worth reflection. Judging by her writings and the interviews she gave, she probably was unfamiliar with feminist texts dealing with this issue and highlighting its importance. It seems that even if Lebl barely mentions rape as an element of camp reality, the fact that they took place should be noted, as not to do so would diminish the suffering of those raped. In Lebl's case she may not have been able to reflect about these events simply because they were too painful. Writing could have been an act of therapeutic auto-narration enabling her to understand her own life story better. Thus her account would not only be a testimony of her time in the camp, but also a reflective record of her own difficult experiences all contributing to her identity (Czerska, 2011, p. 20). Lebl seems to sense intuitively the importance of the problem, so she includes it in her account. In the text she offers a short comment on acts of rape, saying that to survive, women had to divest themselves of any human-like behaviour. Rape was one of many traumatic experiences she underwent. In this first woman's story to be published and commented upon, she mostly wants to give testimony to those days. What is most important for her is that she survived the hell of the camp.

The story of *Ljubičica*... should be considered in the categories of experiences which were the result of political repressions. Setting the memories of Ženi Lebl in a particular historical situation explains, albeit to a minimal degree, how a number of institutions came to exercise authority over their citizens. As a consequence, in post-war Europe numerous social deviations arose. One of their victims was Lebl, who decides to describe her experiences forty years after these traumatic events unfurled. She chooses the form of a documentary testimony, writing about the camp structure and the factors shaping the reality of life in the camp. She also reflects on the biological and sexual problems faced specifically by female inmates. The situation in the camps resulted in inmates' increased awareness of their bodies. This manifests itself in constantly thinking about protecting it and most frequently about the impossibility of keeping it clean. However, this results in surrounding reality being perceived solely in relation to the needs of the body. Different aspects of the experiences felt leave indelible marks on the body, thus creating an important source of knowledge about mankind.

Conclusion

Jolanta Brach-Czaina has pointed out that reflecting upon the female experience cannot only happen in relation to recording the current artistic output of women, but must also be accompanied by a “reconstruction of the past and an excavation of the phenomena that have been omitted or misinterpreted” (Brach-Czaina, 1997, p. 8). The words of the Polish scholar aptly describe the goal I set for myself in the reflections upon the autobiographical writings of the heroine of this article, Ženi Lebl, whose personal writings had to wait long for proper recognition both from historians and literary scholars. The analysis conducted in this article aimed to demonstrate that *Dnevnik jedne Judite* and *Ljubičica bela* constitute a valuable source of knowledge on the experiences of one of the leading authors and researchers in the female discourse on war and prison camps in Yugoslavia. What my deliberations particularly accentuate is the issue of war and post-war traumas as a significant element of women's identity in Yugoslavia, which calls for discussion and reflection. Reading through the lens of her autobiography, Ženi Lebl appears as a custodian of memory who feels

responsible not only for keeping the memory of tragic past tragic events alive, but also for the way in which this memory is preserved. The personal writings of the author need to be analysed against the background of the particular political situation. Owing to this, the narration becomes on the one hand a tale about the fate of war and post-war Yugoslavia and on the other – the story of the victims in these conflicts, including women. Many years after the dramatic events Ženi Lebl decides to describe her experiences. In the book *Dnevnik jedne Judite*, she writes about the reality of Belgrade under occupation and about family relations, dramatically complicated by the war. In *Ljubičica bela* she recounts the camp structure and the mechanisms governing the reality of the camps. An important issue raised by Lebl is also her reflections on the biological and sexual problems encountered by women prisoners. By describing differing aspects of how body awareness is experienced, the author builds a female perspective of how the body is perceived and thus expresses the particularity of female experiences.

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