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# THE CINEMATIC FIGURE OF AN INTERPRETER AT A NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMP: MARTA WEISS IN *THE LAST STAGE* BY WANDA JAKUBOWSKA\*

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## Abstract

Despite a massive amount of archival material on Nazi concentration camps, references to camp translators and interpreters are random, brief, and laconic. They usually consist of dry facts as related in ontological narratives of the Nazi regime victims. In the present paper, these records will be confronted with the portrayal of Marta Weiss, a fictional camp interpreter presented in the 1948 docudrama *Ostatni etap (The Last Stage)* by the Polish film director Wanda Jakubowska, herself a former prisoner of the concentration camp in Birkenau.

To this day, *The Last Stage* remains a “definitive film about Auschwitz, a prototype for future Holocaust cinematic narratives”. *The Last Stage* is also called “the mother of all Holocaust films”, as it establishes several images easily discernible in later narratives on the Holocaust: realistic images of the camp; passionate moralistic appeal; and clear divisions between the victims and the oppressors. At the same time, *The Last Stage* is considered to be an important work from the perspective of feminist studies, as it presents the life and death of female prisoners, femininity, labour and motherhood in the camp, women’s solidarity, and their resistance to the oppressors. *The Last Stage* constitutes a unique quasi-documentary source for the analysis of the role of translators and interpreters working in extreme conditions. Moreover, the authenticity of the portrayal

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of Marta Weiss may not be contested, as it is based on the person of Mala Zimetbaum, a messenger and interpreter at Auschwitz, killed in 1944 after a failed escape from the camp.

The paper presents the topic of interpreting and translating in a concentration camp from three different angles: film studies, feminist studies, and interpreting studies.

**Keywords:** Camp interpreter, KL Auschwitz, feminist studies, film studies, translation and interpreting studies, Mala Zimetbaum

Translators and interpreters are becoming increasingly visible as protagonists in film and literature. The symbolic role of translators and interpreters in literary and cinematic narratives has attracted scrutiny from both literary and film studies. For two decades now, translation and interpreting scholars, too, have been studying a variety of aspects to the way fictional translators and interpreters are portrayed, ranging from pioneering insights by Andres (2008), through volumes edited by Kaindl and Kurz (2008, 2010) and Kurz and Kaindl (2005), to articles by Delabastita (2009), Kaindl (2012, 2014), Tryuk (2017), and Arrojo (2018). Those who depict translators and interpreters in a particular place and time can also investigate the role they play in society, history, and communication. Accounts of real-life situations involving translators or interpreters also proliferate, especially when first-hand testimonies to translation or interpreting practice are not available, that is, when data on the role of a translator or interpreter and their impartiality or visibility are only fragmentary and the ethical aspects of their work pass unnoticed. The position of a translator or interpreter, either real or fictional, has become one of the main research interests for contemporary society-oriented translation and interpreting studies. Cinematic or literary depictions of translators or interpreters (and their practice) in extreme circumstances, e.g. during war, military conflict, in prison, and in camps, allow a fuller and more authentic representation of these events.

This article is focused on Marta Weiss, a fictional camp interpreter at KL Auschwitz, as represented by Wanda Jakubowska in her *The Last Stage* (Polish: *Ostatni etap*) (1948). Jakubowska was a unique film director and militant feminist; she went through an ordeal of a Nazi-German concentration camp. Her cinematic vision of Auschwitz, which offers a feminine angle on the feminine experience of camp reality and a focus on the collective feminine protagonist, is now defined as a quasi-documentary. *The Last Stage* is the first Polish post-war feature film production to have garnered

international praise. With its content, the film serves as relevant study material for researchers in the Holocaust, as well as memory and trauma studies; however, it can also be analysed by both film and feminist scholars. The film is also a point of reference for translation and interpreting scholars. The article is going to combine all these perspectives inherent in Jakubowska's production.

Film is now the most popular narrative medium, and it gives a tangible shape to the collective memory of various groups of society. This remains particularly valid for the memory of events that are of extreme historical, social, or political relevance. The visual representation of the experience of the former prisoners of Nazi-German concentration camps can serve as a source of historical knowledge on the period. According to Joshua Hirsch, this kind of post-traumatic cinema "not only represents traumatic historical events, but also attempts to embody and reproduce the trauma for the spectator through its form of narration" (2004: xi). Film serves as a unique testimony to things that are not accessible through other media.

Wanda Jakubowska (1907–1998), a devoted communist, feminist, and film director, completed her first feature film in 1939. Her screen adaptation of the Polish literary classic *Nad Niemnem* (*On the Niemen*) by Eliza Orzeszkowa was scheduled for première on 5 September 1939. The première never happened, and all the copies of her work likely vanished. The master copy of the film was cut into three pieces and hidden in an unknown location, probably in one of the cellars of the Warsaw Building Cooperative in the district of Żoliborz in Warsaw, where Jakubowska lived and worked before World War II. She was arrested in 1942 and, after a six-month confinement at Pawiak Prison, transferred in April 1943 from Warsaw to KL Auschwitz, where she was assigned number 43513. Jakubowska performed forced labour at the Auschwitz sub-camp Rajsko, which served as an agricultural complex and experimental site where Germans tested the rubber-bearing properties of *Taraxacum kok-saghyz*, a plant intended as a rubber replacement for German industry. Female biologists, botanists, and chemists of various nationalities, including French, Russian, Yugoslavian, or Polish, were assigned to work at Rajsko. Jakubowska's task as a photographer was to document their research. In winter 1945, she survived Death March all the way to Ravensbrück, where she and her fellow prisoners were finally liberated on 30 April 1945.

She made her decision to shoot a film on Auschwitz when leaving the Ravensbrück camp through its infamous gate. In a 1985 interview, which she

gave to Barbara Mruklik-, Jakubowska spoke about her moral imperative to reveal the magnitude of evil she witnessed at the camp. The film was shot on location at Auschwitz, which also served as a therapeutic opportunity to its director. In one of her interviews, Jakubowska said that her actual imprisonment at Auschwitz came to an end in 1948, when she completed the film (Talarczyk-Gubała 2015: 150). In another interview, she spoke about her Auschwitz years as the most formative time for her as a person and an artist (Mruklik 1985: 7).

Jakubowska wrote the script in collaboration with Gerda Schneider, a German communist and Nazi-German camp survivor (incarcerated in 1936, transferred to Auschwitz from KL Ravensbrück in 1942). Schneider was a Blockführerin at Block Four; she was later assigned to perform the same function at Rajsko Kommando, where she met Jakubowska. In 1944, she was transferred to Birkenau for disciplinary reasons. The soundtrack was provided by Roman Palester (1907–1989), an eminent composer who wrote music to a number of Polish films after the war. The Soviet cinematographer Boris Monastyrsky was in turn the director of photography.

Jakubowska delved deep into her personal experience, and the film, which derived from her memories and the memories of her fellow Holocaust survivors, was shot in the barracks which she had known all too well. As extras, the film featured the local community of Oświęcim and former prisoners, who were yet again to go through an ordeal of camp reality. The film crew were accommodated on location, at former SS-guards barracks (Haltorf 2012). *The Last Stage* is still considered to be “the mother of all Holocaust films” (Loewy 2004), and the prototype of all the cinematic narratives about the Holocaust (Haltorf 2012, 2018). According to Łysak (2016: 30), Jakubowska’s film is elevated as the definitive portrayal of Nazi-German camps and the Holocaust. With its imagery, the film has shaped what may now be called the staple representation of the Holocaust: sombre and realistic shots, high moralistic appeal, and a clear division into the victims and the oppressors.

Elie Wiesel, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and Holocaust survivor, once wrote that “Auschwitz cannot be explained nor can it be visualized” (Saxton 2008: 6). Jakubowska’s goal was not to tell the story of Auschwitz, but to show but a fraction of the truth about the place. The film begins with a foreword by the author, who highlights the authenticity of the scenes presented in it:

This film is based on true events, which are but a fraction of the truth about KL Auschwitz. More than four and a half million men, women, and children from across the whole of Nazi-occupied Europe died at Auschwitz.<sup>1</sup>

This figure matches the estimates provided by a Soviet commission who studied Nazi-German atrocities at Auschwitz. Today's accounts speak about roughly more than a million victims. In her statement, Jakubowska reveals her main design: to portray a fragment of horrific camp reality, not KL Auschwitz as a whole. The way Jakubowska presents information about the victims is vital for the understanding of her work. She fails to mention the nationality of the victims, but she does mention that they came from across the whole of Europe. She mentions their sex and age (children). In so doing, she gives resonance to the suffering of women and children. In an interview with Barbara Hollender, Jakubowska says: "Back there, at Auschwitz, I already started putting a script together. As a matter of fact, other prisoners helped me a lot; they would bring news from all over the camp; they were magnificent. They lived there" (Talarczyk-Gubała 2015: 315).

After the war, Jakubowska and Schneider collected testimonies from survivors. Jakubowska's film "is not **the** story of the Holocaust, it is **a** story of the Holocaust" (Kerner 2011: 21).

Jakubowska's goal was to showcase the dignity, solidarity, and sisterhood of the victims of Nazi-German atrocities and to idealise their human rapport. Each and every scene offers a testimony to the prisoners' solidarity, sisterhood, compassion, and sacrifice. There is no denying, however, that contemporary critics and spectators may now see the film as unpalatable propaganda. Admittedly, Jakubowska fails to capture a desperate struggle for survival and ubiquitous fear, hunger, and suffering. The film pictures political prisoners almost exclusively as communists, and no dehumanised mass struggle for survival can be found in the story. Jakubowska's portrayal of an international collective body features "the main enemies of fascism: Jewry, Communism, and the East" (Kerner 2011: 19). This ideological aspect of the film, which was harnessed by the machinery of post-war propaganda, is now heavily criticised.

Jakubowska's legacy is almost invariably equated with this para-documentary account, notwithstanding thirteen other feature films to her

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<sup>1</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, the translation of quotations into English was provided by the translator (B.S.). This also includes quotations from Jakubowska's *The Last Stage*.

name and a nearly fifty years' worth of career as a director. *The Last Stage* attracted an audience of well over seven million spectators, and it was showcased at film festivals across the globe. In 1948, the film was awarded the Grand Prix at the 3rd Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. In 1949, it had its première screening in New York. Film scholars (e.g. Bálazs 1987) describe Jakubowska's film as the first docudrama, i.e., a genre straddling a documentary and a fictional account that represents historical events with dialogues featuring real words uttered by real people and the location that previously witnessed these events and is now serving as a film set (Loewy 2004: 179). According to Bálazs:

its uniqueness is demonstrated by the fact that not only it is a new work of art, it also creates a new artistic genre. (...) A genre in that the events in a way begin to represent themselves, to speak through their metonymic traces. (...) Auschwitz functions as a set, for a series of miniature dramas, but it is not only a set but the very image of [hell] itself (as cited in: Loewy 2004: 179).

*The Last Stage* attracts a wealth of scholarly analysis, including that of a feminist angle. The main reason for this, as argued by Talarczyk-Gubała (2015: 180), is that the film passes the Bechdel test with flying colours: it features women who talk to each other about something else than a man. The film is also feminist in that it was created by women, and it almost exclusively features female protagonists. The film depicts an international collective of female prisoners, prisoner functionaries, and guards. Few men (e.g. a camp doctor, *lagerkomendant*, and Tadek, a prisoner with whom the female protagonist escapes from the camp) provide but a backdrop for a quintessentially feminine representation of the camp. The main focus of the film is on the subsequent stages through which women were deprived of their femininity: their heads were shaved and they were tattooed with camp numbers; they were dressed in striped uniforms or tattered clothes. However, other aspects are present in equal measure, including motherhood, childbirth at the camp, solidarity expressed through collective singing, dance, or prayer, and resistance to the enemy. After many years of absence in literature, the issue of feminism and gender in critical circumstances such as the Holocaust and concentration camps is now attracting greater scrutiny. Women's sexuality, their emaciated bodies, and forced prostitution were described by numerous sociologists as well as film and literary scholars (e.g. Karwowska 2009; Nikliborc 2010; Stöcker-Sobelman 2012; Petö et

al. 2015, Talarczyk-Gubała 2015, and Czarnecka 2018). Jakubowska's film is now also a valid point of reference for feminist studies.

The film is primarily set at the camp's *rewir* (a hospital in the camp jargon) for female prisoners. The film reveals dreadful living conditions, relentless roll calls, gas chamber selections, marching out to work, gruelling labour, executions, and helpless women led to slaughter, all this happening at a backdrop of perfectly oiled surveillance machinery, full of guards and SS men. This nightmare unfolds to the sounds of a camp orchestra conducted by a female prisoner. Each and every tragic moment at the camp reverberates with music.

The film portrays a female collective protagonist, who become an agent of a supra-national and international resistance movement. Marta stands out from the crowd; she reaches her political maturity at the camp when she says: "Not until at the camp could I learn how to think on my own. I wouldn't if it wasn't for my fellow prisoners" (Scene 60:49). This sentence may sound lofty these days. However, in 1948, Jakubowska used such phrases not only to placate the new regime, but also as a genuine expression of her political views. The film depicts women's solidarity in suffering and in struggle against fascism, and their resistance to fascism and commitment to the communist cause. This collective female protagonist mainly features communists of various nationalities, but also women who grow to become communists at the camp.

In this one large Tower of Babel such as Auschwitz, Jakubowska portrays women of various nationalities: Polish (the demoralised *Blockführerin* Elza and the doctor wannabe Lalunia), Russian (doctor Eugenia and nurse Nadia), German (nurse Anna, modelled on Gerda Schneider). The Polish prisoner Helena gives birth to a child, which a German doctor kills with a phenol jab. The French prisoner Michèle intones *La Marseillaise* on her way to a gas chamber. There is also Desa, a heroic Yugoslav resistance fighter, a nameless Roma woman, and last but not least, Marta Weiss, an interpreter.

For some time now, translators and interpreters in critical or extreme circumstances have been attracting scrutiny from translation and interpreting scholars. A growing number of publications have addressed the work of translators and interpreters at Nazi-German concentration camps and the Soviet Gulag (Tryuk 2010, 2012, 2015 and Wolf 2016). Translators and interpreters working in extreme conditions deserve a separate treatment for their unique and heroic acts. The fact that translators and interpreters were an inherent part of concentration camp reality is demonstrated by a variety

of accounts, testimonies, and memoirs to be found at the museum archives of former concentration camps. Extended camp literature may provide evidence on individual translators and interpreters from that time (Tryuk 2012: 52–86).

Translators and interpreters were simply bound to emerge at concentration camps, just as they were at any other multilingual communities. On their arrival at the camp, many prisoners would declare to be professional translators. Records at the Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau Archives offer a number of relevant entries in the registers of new entrants (Tryuk 2012: 59). In their majority, these prisoners were Jews born either in Poland or Russia, or transported from France or Belgium. Only few of them survived. Most of them were not even assigned camp numbers, which means they were gassed immediately on arrival. Those prisoners who declared they spoke German or other languages that were deemed useful, especially by camp administration, were assigned to act as translators or interpreters (Shelley 1986). This task was given to prisoners at each *kommando* or block. They often combined this function with that of a camp messenger or registrar. There also existed the function of a camp interpreter, or *Lagerdolmetscher*. In his memoir, the former Auschwitz prisoner Stanisław Skibicki writes: “Camp leadership communicated with us through interpreters” (Tryuk 2012: 62).

Camp interpreters had exactly the same status as their fellow prisoners. The function they performed offered no guarantee of survival: prisoner-interpreters had no chance to avoid punishment or transport to another camp, where their struggle for survival would start anew. Former prisoners usually remember interpreters as “good colleagues” and “decent and fairly good people” (Tryuk 2012: 52–86).

In this cinematic depiction of “a concentration camp Babylon”, Marta Weiss, an interpreter and its main protagonist, guides the spectator through the hell of Auschwitz. Marta is a Polish Jew; for her linguistic abilities, she is appointed camp interpreter by Commandant Hans Schmidt. Marta speaks Russian, German, French, and Serbian. The languages can be heard in the film. The only language that is missing is Yiddish. Marta’s assistance is indispensable: both to prisoners and SS men. She understands everyone at the camp and can speak to each and every party. With her perfect command of German, she can also communicate with German guards. She interprets more than mere languages: she is able to translate brutal camp reality. When a new transport of prisoners arrives one foggy night at the Birkenau ramp,



a terrified mother asks Marta: “Marta, listen, what’s this all about, where are we?” (Scene 12:50). As she flees the camp, she also takes sensitive information with her. Her escape poses a serious threat to her Nazi oppressors: she can now reveal the whole truth about camp atrocities. Marta also connects the spectator with camp reality. She guides the viewer through the horror of Auschwitz. Seconds before her death, Marta also utters the closing words of the film: “Don’t you ever let Auschwitz happen again”. “We won’t”, promises Helena, holding Marta in her arms (Scene 1:44:09).

The film begins with a scene of round-up in the streets of Warsaw. The following sequence portrays a transport of Jewish prisoners as they arrive at the Birkenau ramp at night, dense fog penetrated by searchlights. Right from the outset, when the train stops at an unknown location and a group of terrified people leave the carriage, there are cries and shouts in the air, children and whole families losing their bearings. Marta provides interpretation to the words of Commandant Hans Schmidt:

SS man: Es ist kein Grund zur Angst und Aufregung vorhanden. Ich bitte, dass ihr meinen Anweisungen der SS ruhig Folge leistet.

Marta: On mówi, że nie mamy się czego bać. Mamy spokojnie robić to, co nam każą. [He says there’s nothing to be frightened of. We should keep calm and do what we’re told.]

SS man: Die Trennung muss stattfinden, da wir nicht alle in einem Lager unterbringen können. Die alten Leute und Frauen mit Kindern kommen in anderes Lager, während die jungen und gesunden hier bleiben.

Marta: Mamy się rozdzielić. Nie mogą nas wszystkich pomieścić w jednym obozie. [We must separate. We can’t all go to one camp.]

SS man: Ich verspreche euch, dass ihr euch alle bald wiedersehen werdet.

Marta: Obiecuje nam, że niedługo wszyscy się razem spotkacie. [We have his word. We’ll meet again shortly.]

The SS man spots her. He speaks to her angrily:

SS man [to Marta]: Was halten Sie für einen Vortrag?

Marta: Die Menschen verstehen nicht Deutsch und ich übersetze, was Sie gesagt haben.

SS man: Ach so. Sprechen und schreiben Sie fließend Deutsch?

Marta: Ja.

SS man: Gut! Ich brauche eine Dolmetscherin. Sie werden bei mir arbeiten. Sie gehen danach da drüben!

An anxious elderly man speaks to Marta:

Co on mówił, czego on od ciebie chciał? [What did he say? What is it that he wants from you?]

Marta: Powiedział, że będę pracować jako tłumaczka. [He says I'll be working as an interpreter.]

(Scene: 14:57–16:10)

It is quite likely that other interpreters were “recruited” in a similar manner.

Once “lodged” in a barrack, Marta is having her camp number (14111) tattooed on her forearm. As an interpreter, she is allowed to keep her hair, whereas other women from her transport have to go through a humiliating ritual where their heads are shaved. While other prisoners are forced to wear striped uniforms, she is given “civilian clothes”: a jacket with a single stripe on her back and a black *Dolmetscher* armband. Former camp prisoners mention the armband in their testimonies. At KL Auschwitz-Birkenau, camp interpreters wore armbands on their uniforms, which was similar to other prisoner functionaries such as *Schreiber*, *Rapportschreiber*, or *Arbeitsdienst*. In his testimony, Jerzy Poźmiński speaks of a white armband with black letters reading *Dolmetscher*, while Tadeusz Paczuła says: “A *Lagersdolmetscher* wore a black armband” (Tryuk 2012: 62). In Jakubowska’s film, Marta wears a black armband.

On her way to the barrack, she is confronted with camp reality for the first time. She spots a human body hanging from barbed wire:

Marta: Co to jest, to, to człowiek? [What’s that? Is this a human being?]

Female prisoner: To muzułmanin na drucie elektrycznym. [This is a *musulman* on an electric wire.]

Marta: Muzułmanin? [A *musulman*?]

Female prisoner: Nie zadawaj naiwnych pytań. Muzułmanin to taka, co więcej nie może. [Why don’t you keep these childish questions to yourself? She’s a *musulman*, she can’t go on any more.]

Marta: A to, co to za fabryka? [What that? This factory there...]

Female prisoner: Fabryka? To krematorium, gdzie się pali ludzi. Teraz właśnie palą się ci, którzy z tobą przyjechali. Miałś rodzinę? Głupstwo. Pewnego dnia i tak wszystkie pojedziemy przez komin i wtedy na pewno się spotkamy. [A factory? This is a crematorium. This is where human bodies are burnt. Those who came with you in a transport are now burning there. Did you

have a family? Forget about it. We are all going to go through these smokestacks one day. We'll all meet there sooner or later.]

(Scene 19:58–20:23)

Marta strives to aid every single prisoner at every single critical moment. She alleviates their suffering; she also tries to help when the sadistic *Blockführerin* Elza yells at an elderly French woman, who is too exhausted to get up and go to work:

Elderly woman: Je suis malade.

Marta: Ona jest chora, nie może iść. [She's ill. She can't walk.]

Kapo: Czyś ty z byka spadła? [Are you berserk?]

(Scene 31:21–31:23)

What Marta gets in return is painful bludgeoning. As mentioned before, the film's predominant focus is on international solidarity, antifascism, communist resistance, and underground activity, which Marta joins as soon as she enters the camp. Since she speaks fluent German, she can stop a guard at the gate under a pretext that he has to answer an urgent phone call. In the meantime, a cart full of banned cargo (clothes, medicines, and underground pamphlets) can enter the camp. For prisoners, her assistance is simply indispensable:

Female prisoner: Marta, słuchaj kochanie, zaraz przyjadą chłopcy, przywiozą różne rzeczy dla obozu. Chodzi o to, żebyś przeszkodziła, gdyby chcieli skontrolować wóz. Jak myślisz, uda się? [Marta, darling, listen to me, the boys are coming any moment now. They'll bring supplies to the camp. Your task is to step in if the guards come and search the cart. Do you think we can make it?]

Marta: Musi się udać. [We must]

(Scene 57:05–57:53)

Marta enjoys the freedom of movement around the camp. She acts as a liaison to different prisoners. Camp guards, too, know her very well. Marta is given orders by the camp resistance to escape from the camp with Tadek, a male prisoner, to spread sensitive information about the camp and its imminent evacuation to Germany. The escape of an interpreter is a massive blow to the Germans. The Commandant gets into serious trouble as a result:

Commandant: Von wo können Sie das alles wissen?

Superior: Von wo? Wenn man solche Idioten als Lagerkommandanten hat...

Commandant: Idioten?

Superior: Jawohl, Idioten. Und Sie sind auch einer. Wenn wir, wie Sie, unfähig sind, ein Lager zu führen, zeigt am besten die Flucht dieser Dolmetscherin. Sagen Sie mir, wie war das eigentlich möglich!

(Scene 1:36:50–1:36:59)

Marta and Tadek are captured and brought back to the camp. During interrogation, Marta interprets the SS man's questions, but she refuses to relay Tadek's answers. She is no longer a mere interpreter or an intermediary between words and worlds. She stands up for Tadek; she is now also a prisoner.

SS man: Was haben Sie davon?

Tadek: Nie rozumiem. [I don't understand.]

SS man: Sagen Sie es ihm!

Marta: Pyta się, co nam z tego przyszło? [He asks if it was worth it.]

SS man: Ich bekomme ja euch doch alle! Aber euch beiden tut es mir leid. Ihr seid so jung.

Marta: Mówi, że nas mu jest okropnie żal, bo jesteśmy tacy młodzi. [He says he feels sorry for us because we're so young.]

SS man: Ich habe einen Vorschlag für euch. Sagt mir nur, wohin ihr diese Papiere gebracht habt, und ihr seid frei.

Marta: Mamy mu tylko powiedzieć, dokąd zanieśliśmy papiery i będziemy wolni. [All he wants to know is where the papers are. We will be released if we tell him.]

Tadek: Powiedz mu, że nic nie wiemy o żadnych papierach. A obietnicami może się dać wypchać! [Tell him I don't know anything about the papers. He can get stuffed with his promises!]

Marta: Wir wissen nichts.

(Scene 01:40:00–1:40:59)

They are both tortured and sentenced to death. The film comes to a close with Marta's execution. Marta expires when Allied squadrons fly over the camp and start dropping bombs. The Germans flee the spot in a panic. The time has come for liberation and revenge. Naturally, the ending reflects the ideology and propaganda of that time.

Marta Weiss was modelled on Mala Zimetbaum (1918–1944), an Auschwitz prisoner, camp number 19880, a Polish Jew captured in Belgium. Since she spoke many languages: Dutch, French, German, Italian, and Polish,

she was assigned to work as a messenger (*Läuferin*) and interpreter. With her function, she grew to become an important member of the camp resistance movement. She was also mentioned by Holocaust survivors, including Halina Birenbaum:

Mala was a pretty young Jewish girl from Belgium. We used to see her every morning or evening; she stood at the camp gate when we left for work and when we came back; she used to not down the gangs leaving, and their destinations. We also used to see her when she came to our block overseers with instructions or orders from the camp HQ. On these occasion she often warned us of a forthcoming “selection”, disciplinary actions or a “visit” from dr. Mengele; as a camp runner she was the first to hear of everything (1996: 148).

In one of the scenes, after the selection process has come to an end, Marta stands with another prisoner functionary at the Birkenau camp gate. Mala Zimetbaum was likely to stand there at the gate every morning as her fellow prisoners left for work, and every evening when they came back to the camp, exhausted.

Halina Birenbaum continues: “the story of this courageous girl, her life and death, was for a long time the topic of conversation in the camp. Mala became a legend to us, a symbol of heroism” (1996: 149). In her memoir, Krystyna Żywulska, another former Auschwitz prisoner also writes about Mala:

Mala came here with a Belgian transport. She’s a Polish Jew and knows Polish well. She’s pretty and clever, so in the two years that she was a Messenger, she succeeded in gaining the confidence of the officials. She met someone from the men’s camp and they fell in love. He’s a Pole from Warsaw. (...) He also held a job, they could meet often. (...) [When they escaped] he dressed up as an SS man and she as an overseer (2004: 122).

Żywulska, Birenbaum, and Szmaglewska write about the love of Mala and Edek Galiński (camp number 531)<sup>2</sup> and their escape. Their story was

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<sup>2</sup> The love story of Mala and Edek has become one of the major themes in the commemoration of the Holocaust. It has made its way to numerous historical publications, as well as artistic and popular representations. In Poland, Michał Żarnecki and Jacek Bławut shot a documentary called *An Auschwitz Love Story* (1989), while Michał Bukojemski touched upon the love story of Mala and Edek in his documentary series *Z Kroniki Auschwitz* (2004). In 2009, Michał Gałek and Marcin Nowakowski published a comic book titled *Epizody z Auschwitz – 1. Miłość w cieniu zagłady*; in 2017, Roman Wawrzaszek published *Romeo*

one of the hottest news around the camp. Seweryna Szmaglewska notes: “this romantic story gained all the attention at the camp; all prisoners wished the lovers good fortune” (1994: 258).

However, the fugitives are recognised, recaptured, and transferred back to the camp. Sentenced to death, they both end up at Block 11. Żywulska reminisces:

Everything had been in vain! That wonderfully manoeuvred escape and our happiness. It wasn't Mala who was important. Thousands like her died here everyday. It wasn't Mala's cause, it was our cause. It meant that no one could escape from here. (...) Poor Mala had scarcely tasted freedom and she was already sitting in a cell and they were surely beating her.

News about the capture spread immediately. There was mourning at the camp. Each one felt as if she had been affected personally (2004: 144).

Mala was a well-known figure among prisoners. Primo Levi describes her thus:

Mala was a young Polish Jewess who was captured in Belgium and spoke many languages fluently, therefore in Birkenau she acted as an interpreter and messenger and as such enjoyed a certain freedom of movement. She was generous and courageous; she had helped many of her companions and was loved by all of them. In the summer of 1944 she decided to escape with Edek, a Polish political prisoner. She not only wanted to reconquer her freedom; she was also planning to document the daily massacre at Birkenau.

(...) While she was waiting in a cell to be interrogated, a companion was able to approach her and asked her: “How are things, Mala?” She answered: “Things are always fine with me” (2017: 141).

He depicts her heartrending death in the following passage:

She had managed to conceal a razor blade on her body. At the foot of the gallows, she cut the artery on one of her wrists, the SS who acted as executioners tried to snatch the blade from her and Mala, under the eyes of all the women in the camp, slapped his face with her bloodied arm. Enraged, other guards

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*i Julia z KL Auschwitz*, which gained much publicity. The love story of Mala and Edek has also inspired composers and theatre directors. In 2001, the Greek composer Nikos Karvelas created a musical called *Mala: I Mousiki Tou Anemou* [*Mala, Music of the Wind*], in which the Greek-Cypriot singer Anna Vissi performed the leading role in 2007, and the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin staged the play *Mala Zemetbaum* by Armin Petras and Thomas Lawinky.

immediately came running: a prisoner, a Jewess, a woman, had dared to defy them! They trampled her to death; she expired, fortunately for her, on the cart taking her to the crematorium (2017: 142).

Krystyna Żywulska, too, recalls Mala: “they were beating Mala, (...) they questioned her. (...) Mala did not squeal” (2004: 144). According to Żywulska, at the foot of the gallows, Mala cried to the surrounding SS men:

I know I’m dying, but that’s not important. The important thing is that you are dying with me. Your hours are numbered. You’re dying, you hateful viper and thousands of vipers like you. Nothing can help you, nothing can save you (Żywulska 2004: 149).

Modelled on Mala Zimetbaum, the main protagonist of Jakubowska’s film is not only a realistic figure portrayed in extreme circumstances. She is also an active and heroic interpreter who guides the spectator through the horror of camp reality. While interpreting words, she also champions a vision of her surrounding world, a world in which millions of people struggled for survival and died. She uses her linguistic capabilities to stand up for the weakest, and she even tries to rescue them. Marta gives voice back to those who were made voiceless and presents their testimonies. Camp interpreters were well aware of the consequences of their actions. They risked their own lives whenever they took the risk to save the lives of other people. Marta Weiss strove to save her fellow prisoners, but she failed to save herself. Her demise, just as the demise of any other translator in extreme circumstances, be it Mala Zimetbaum’s death or that of any other camp interpreter, is one of the most heartrending moments in camp testimonies (Tryuk 2010). At the same time, right from the outset, Marta Weiss finds herself in the very midst of conflict: she does realise that her language skills could also be put to use by her oppressors. In the face of imminent death, she continues to be an interpreter. She refuses to give up until the very end. Arguably, the entire history of translation, as well as fictional portrayals of translators, offer few if any figures of comparable potential and activity, which only shows that the imperative of impartiality and neutrality cannot be upheld in extreme circumstances.

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