

IN SEARCH OF TRANSCULTURAL MEMORY IN EUROPE

ISTME WORKING PAPER N.1/2016



MEMORY IN RELATION TO AN OBJECT IN A CONTEXT OF THE MATERIALLY DEPRIVED TOTAL INSTITUTION OF THE NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMP

Łukasz Pośluszny



ABSTRACT

In this article, following the steps of biography of things, attention will be paid to picture few different biographies of bread, which as an object of great importance appears constantly in Nazi concentration camp prisoners' testimonies. It raises the question why certain objects are so strongly present in memory, while others remain in the dark. By tracing bread usages and trajectories in which metamorphoses occur, I try to better understand why memory of the camp manifests itself in relation to bread and what kind of forms it takes. Topics of memory as embodied rituals and habits present in everyday life, as well as, place of bread in the narratives will be also discussed in this paper. This study is based on biographical materials.

Working papers are preliminary works in progress. The content are those of the authors and the CFE does not endorse, approve or guarantee its content. The CFE assumes no responsibility for, and expressly disclaims all liability for, any consequences resulting from the use of the information herein.

Centre for European Studies at Lund University
Box 201: SE-221 00 LUND
Phone +46 (0)46-222 88 19
E-mail: CFE_Books@cfe.lu.se

© 2015, Rune Brandt Larsen and CFE
Layout: Marco La Rosa

MEMORY IN RELATION TO AN OBJECT IN A CONTEXT OF THE MATERIALLY DEPRIVED TOTAL INSTITUTION OF THE NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMP

ŁUKASZ POSŁUSZNY, ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY, POLAND¹

INTRODUCTION

According to Igor Kopytoff (1986), not only individuals but things as well have biographies. In looking at a thing's biography, one tries to find answers to questions about its production, its history – within which the most significant feature is the recognizable “ages” of its life – and how its use has evolved through time and space. That perspective will enable us to see the social values and interactions of groups mirrored in the materialized dimensions of things. In the article, therefore, I would like to look into the severely deprived material life of Nazi concentration camp prisoners and their everyday struggle in a different manner from the one we are accustomed to, by taking a more materially oriented approach, and focusing on one particular object: bread.

The decision to examine bread, rather than spoons or needles, in the accounts of survivors is based on three factors. Firstly, its importance in memoirs and testimonies, both in qualitative and quantitative aspects, undoubtedly situates it as one of the core objects of everyday life in concentration camps. Secondly, its recognizable presence in private and public narratives raises the question of its role in commemoration processes. Thirdly, bread was an ambiguous object which could be easily transformed and adjusted to inmates' needs. In the article, attention will be paid to different biographies of bread in the everyday life of prisoners of concentration camps (mostly KL Majdanek), and its evolution from an object within the sphere of food to dematerialized representations in the exercise of memory. Accounts come from written texts and memoirs, Majdanek State Museum's archives, together with narrative enquiries conducted with survivors by the author.

¹ Corresponding author:

Adam Mickiewicz University, Department of Sociology, Szamarzewskiego 89, 60568 Poznań, Poland.
Email: posluszny.lukasz@gmail.com; posluk@amu.edu.pl

BREAD IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS

In the concentration camps, bread was a major food type and a great treasure. Its arrival was the main point of the day, awaited with great anticipation by the prisoners, who created rituals and tools connected with food, which in turn, allowed them to shape social relations (Latour, 2005; Hodder, 2012). Among many objects, such as sharpened spoons used as knives for cutting and spreading (Arad, AMPA-B), instruments were created to promote the fair distribution of bread. Because bread was given out in loaves, inmates had to share it: "During dividing [bread] discords arise that one got more, and another less ..." (Kwiatkowski, 1966: 71) ; hence, to resolve arguments, specially designed scales were introduced and/or a prisoner was assigned the role of righteous judge, thereby gaining additional respect and a better position.

Halina Birenbaum (2008) emphasizes that the camp put one in the position of having to fight for everything – a piece of the floor, a blanket, or a bowl. This is especially evident at the moment of arrival, when one is full of despair, stress, and loneliness, separated from one's primary group, without contact with relatives outside the camp or support from local groups, which have not yet been formed. Erving Goffman (1961) rightly placed the total institution in opposition to the family, which weakens the effect of the former even from beyond the camps' fences. This is so because the total institution is not only a housing community, but also a formal organization which produces other forms of group life and relationships within itself. However, even in total institutions, many informal groups or cliques arise. In that context, exceptional skills, often related to operations on things, play a much more significant role than one might expect. An excellent example of this phenomenon is an account from KL Majdanek, where, on the basis of skills connected to food management, the institution of the "family" was set up. It contained the roles of head of the family, family members, and dependent "ducklings":

We were selecting on various criteria: age, lifestyle, views, interests and ordinary human sympathy. ... The head of the family is the one who divided bread and in general was in charge of food. Parcels were taken to her (when the packages started to come), rutabaga and potatoes were brought her, and she had to "make ends meet". In the family there was a division of labor, and none of the members shirked from work ... Drones were expelled from the family or left voluntarily. However, in many families there were "ducklings": people very helpless, distracted, physically weak, elderly or of a very young age. Their survival of the camp is thanks in large part to the local families. (Woliniewska, 1988: 9).

The unofficial formation of the institution of the “family”, based on a homophilic mechanism, was very important for the survival of the prisoners (Karpiński, 2009; Somashekhar, 2014). On the one hand, the job of taking care of food represented a privileged position. On the other hand, it was a special manipulative skill concerning bread that predestined individuals to take a leading position in a group. The term “family” used in the account, plus the existence of “ducklings”, situates this organizational structure within *Gemeinschaft* rather than *Gesellschaft*, and, as such, is a form opposing the power of the total institution through mimicry of the family, reproducing its traditional hierarchies and assigning its various responsibilities and roles. The camp family provided a sense of security, but was only one among many forms of unofficial institutions created within the total institution of Nazi concentration camps. The camp family was sometimes replaced by, or functioned at the same time as, more spatially and numerically limited domestic (bunk bed), friendly, or collegial (work) relationships:

One day, Tadeusz Borowski proposed the establishment of a joint household. All packages, as well as organized food, were to be common property. Portions were supposed to be allotted by a host chosen by us. The purpose – to ensure that each of us was constantly provided with food. We adopted the project unanimously. Tadeusz Borowski became a host. (Jagoda et al., 1984: 94)

In creating this type of alliance, bread was the crucial mediator. Taking it out of one’s own mouth and dividing it with or donating it to another, was treated as an act of heroism, for which only a friend, a rare altruist, or a desperate person could muster enough courage. At the same time, hiding extra portions of bread from inmates might sometimes have been dangerous. It was better to share with neighbors, as that not only resulted in personal satisfaction and aroused sympathy, but also enforced the return of the favor, cemented relationships, and bred true life-long friendships (Jagoda et al., 1984).

In this respect, the story of Adam Nowosławski is especially striking. One night his shoes were stolen, and he had to begin saving bread to exchange for another pair. After a week of collecting bread and taking it out of his own mouth, someone stole his bread. Then, after three weeks of starving himself, he was finally able to provide the required two loaves, and, in return, received a pair of shoes. However, soon after putting them on, he learned that his colleague, who suffered from tuberculosis, had been robbed of his shoes in the night, and, knowing that the colleague might have died without them, decided to give his own shoes away. As a result, he started putting bread aside again, risking his own life. Both inmates survived, and Nowosławski received, as an expression of gratitude, a pair of shoes cast in gold, which he described as a ‘beautiful souvenir’, and which bore the following inscription: “For Adam Nowosławski, the most noble man in the darkest hours of life, J. Giergielewicz” (Nowosławski, APMM). This golden “monument” not

only stays in his apartment, attracting the attention of guests, but more importantly, enables the story to endure, legitimizes it, and functions as a sign of heroism recognized.

Because bread might have determined life or death, stealing it from another inmate was considered the worst offense: “Steal, but only from magazines. Not from the prisoner” (Greń and Połuszny, 2012: 134). Cheating, as a variation of theft, was treated similarly. Failure to keep a promise to exchange items for bread could result in an inmate’s subjection to a tribunal and exclusion from the community (Błońska, 1969: 240; Pawłowski, APMM: 3-6).

FREEDOM AND THE MEMORY IN THE BODY

In the testimonies of concentration camp prisoners after the war, one can notice a specific attitude that they express when mentioning bread. They pay the utmost respect to it, cannot stand the sight of decaying bread, and are afraid of running out of it; hence they gather it, store unmeasured quantities of it, and never throw any away: “I think of the importance of bread for life, then and now. I gently place the uneaten, non-kosher sandwich in a bag and reverently carry it home” (Rawicki and Ellis, 2011: 157). In addition, years after the war, bread is still the object of such strong desire, biologically inscribed in the body, that former prisoners’ taste buds self-activate at the sight of it (Jagoda et al., 1984; Rawicki and Ellis, 2011). The camp experience of survivors is not only reflected in the attitude towards bread, but is also expressed in embodied rituals and habits, which represent a special type of memory connected to bodily practices:

My first question when I get home from work: is there bread, and is there enough of the bread for dinner and breakfast ... I do not let myself tread on bread crumbs, which I feed to the birds. What people around find funny, for me is a kind of ritual, since for many of the prisoners, bread saved their lives. (Jagoda et al., 1984: 209)

I collect every crumb of bread, and instinctively put it in my mouth, which is often followed with a smile from my family. I feed birds with remnants of food ... (Jagoda et al., 1984: 209)

Moreover, from time to time I hide something [food] surreptitiously, for later. (Jagoda et al., 1984: 209)

I mean respect for our food, especially bread. In the camp I always dreamed that the day would come when the one-kilogramme loaf of bread would be only for me. That is why I do not allow myself to throw

stale bread away, and I eat it, no matter how tough it is. I've been having periods (because that is probably what to call it) when I do not use a knife to cut the bread, but use my hands. (Jagoda et al., 1984: 208)

Just as thinking about bread and its taste during imprisonment evoked memories of home, when sent by the family and ensuring the continuity of belonging to it, so after the war, for many survivors, its qualities recalled the reality of incarceration and may have revived traumatic memories (Rawicki and Ellis, 2011; Tumarkin, 2013), as in the reference to "...certain things that are so etched in my memory, or maybe, in my sense of smell, are the memory" (Rawicki, 2009:16).

Many rituals and ways of handling the bread in the present were formed during imprisonment, which, as an experience, does not stop resonating with and echoing events of the past. That particular resocialization may be fragmentary, observed in the context of everyday life and embodied rituals that reflect the reverent attitude to bread, thus becoming both a reminder of the past and a symbol of certain values. Additionally, these habits are often transmitted intergenerationally, and can be seen mirrored in the beliefs or practices of the second or third generation (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2009; Kidron, 2012). Respecting bread means also respecting life, especially the frail and the weak; that is why bread is used to feed birds.

Bread was the most holy object in the house. They almost worshipped it. Every piece they ate was like ... I don't know ... like reliving the moment they almost died of hunger and were saved by that piece of bread ... that meant that you eat old bread until it's dry and then turn it into toast, then bread crumbs, which become meatballs ... and then when the bread crumbs are stale you feed it to the birds ... (Kidron, 2012: 203)

Differences in the way former prisoners handle bread are sometimes painfully recognized by family members or by people who witness those "oddities" in behavior, perpetuated mechanically or unconsciously, and often against the survivors' will. The power of habit and ritual can plague one with its compulsiveness, inducing a feeling of shame, and also endangering one through exposure to ridicule in social situations. For some prisoners, however, rituals practiced for years, together with the attitude to bread and food, are an important part of them. They strongly identify with this tendency and seem to treat it as a sign of a special kind of enlightenment, reserved to them alone.

MEMORY GLUED TOGETHER WITH BREAD

The sharp hunger constantly present in the camp focused the prisoners' thoughts on food, and especially bread, which was considered the best possible meal. For this reason, in written and spoken memories of

witnesses, one can easily hear, as it were echoing their thoughts at the time, repeated references to the topic of food and bread: “Texts dealing with threats of hunger, death or suffering were written in the hundreds – how much there was of bread, soup or deaths” (Greń and Połuszný, 2012). Expressed in the above quote is a certain weariness of stories recalling the same themes and patterns, a trap many prisoners fell into. This observation should raise the question: why, despite the mundaneness and universality of that experience, do witnesses in their accounts devote so much attention to everyday issues, in this case, “bread”?

One explanation may lie in the fact that bread, as is recognized worldwide, has the power to convey existential and religious symbolism of universal import, illustrating the scale of both human solidarity and wickedness:

We believed that this great misfortune united us all in one family – yet the first ones, who in January and early February returned from Majdanek, recounted how some waited for the death of their comrades, so as to get an extra ration of bread. How it was all confirmed! (Kwiatkowski, 1966: 100-101)

However, an explanation based on a cultural trope is not the only one. Stories about bread are also strongly associated with, and used to signal, exceptional cases, when prisoners faced a severe penalty, tragic event, or unexpected celebration and happiness. Nothing is remembered better than an unexpected reward in the form of an additional feast, or, by contrast, the bread for breakfast, or shoes, being stolen by a thief. However, bread appears also as if by chance and incidentally, no longer as a main subject, but at most as part of the background; it often carries no particular meaning for a story, but still runs constantly through the narrative:

I trudge to the block, and I realize that I haven’t eaten anything since morning. On the block I am given my eighth of bread. Coffee, of course, is no more. I undress. The leg is festering, throbbing. The doctor told me yesterday that I have inflammation of the periosteum. (Kwiatkowski, 1966: 41)

Crushing lice became a mandatory action in the morning and evening. There aren’t however, as in the reign of the king of the Sun, silver tweezers and a little hammer to do it; one just crushes them between his fingernails, then wipes his hands on his pants. With such hands we eat later, e.g., Bread. (Kwiatkowski, 1966: 71)

It seems that some stories lift off on bread, gravitate towards it, and return like a chorus, the bread adding consistency, or functioning as a comma to separate thoughts and events, or as a full stop to conclude a

specific fragment. It is a quite ambiguous object in memory narratives. On the one hand, it signals symbolic and unique events, while, on the other hand, it marks quite daily actions, both in the context of the concentration camp, and in that of the time of freedom. Permanent repetition of the topic of bread in the background of the stories may reflect the rhythm of everyday life in a camp, with irresistible thoughts of bread haunting inmates day and night, as well as marking the passage of time, measured by the widely described highlight of the day, namely the distribution of bread and soup. In addition, bread most likely had such a strong affective impact on prisoners that it stimulated their attention to unimaginable levels, and influenced the way they remembered things and events, which could explain in part why it occurs so often in testimonies of former prisoners and survivors:

And the smell of fresh baked bread – when it wafted in, it was just excruciating. I can only compare it with what I read and what I know about narcotics, narcotic agents – addicts. You know, how they crave a fix. They don't know; they just go out of their mind, especially if it's hard narcotics like cocaine or whatever. It's there. That's how we felt.

So when you ask me what we did, I don't know, but there we were, just spending the time – dreading the time when the smell of the bread will come. (Rawicki, 2009:16)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Bread as a staple food can metonymically represent every meal (Kowalski, 2000). Eating is a basic human practice that involves one in a social order and conditions one to live within groups. Practices connected to bread can objectify, indicate inequality, or exclude, but can also empower, bind groups, and include individuals. What from an egoistic or common-sense perspective may seem insane, like sharing food when one is hungry, may paradoxically save one's life, because in subsequent times of crisis one will find security and protection within a social group, even a dyad. Bread can be a type of food, but also the subject of trade and currency, a container, a material, and a substance. It is a plastic object that can undergo many metamorphoses, depending on social needs.

After the war, bread becomes a symbol of prison life, intensively used by survivors in their accounts. However, the memory of the camp is also conveyed through everyday practices related to bread: showing the great respect in which it is held, and recording the rituals and habits of camp provenance, which, though not always conscious, form an embodied and living memory of that time. But bread is also present as a narrative element that illustrates deeply symbolic events, both momentous and traumatic. Its function

at the narrative level seems to be the bonding of what is prosaic and what is extraordinary. On the one hand, it helps the story to flow steadily and circularly in the rhythm of meals given out from one day to the other, creating bridges within the story. On the other hand, it indicates events of another order, of universal or incidental significance, which are engraved in the memory as constructions bonded with bread.

For many reasons, food should not be perceived as belonging to the category of things (Krajewski, 2013). However, the case of bread in the camp seems to weaken that claim. Bread in a concentration camp context, and most likely in many other total institutions, is an object with blurred boundaries, moving easily between its definition as food and as things. If one creates a continuum of food–thing, bread and its various forms are located at all relevant points of the axis. Beyond that, bread immaterializes, becoming a form of representation: the foundation, and the switch, that activates memories of the camp, but also provides a secure basis for their existence.

REFERENCES

- APMM (Majdanek State Museum Archive). Gorczyca T, *Relacje*, VII/M-387.
- APMM, Nowosławski A, *Zbiór nagrań video*, XXII-13.
- APMM, Pawłowski R, *Grypsy*, IV-97.
- Birenbaum H (2008) *Hope is the Last to Die*. Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.
- Błońska S (1969) Pół roku i parę dni. In: Rajca C and Rosiak E and Wiśniewska A (eds.) *Jesteśmy świadkami. Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Lubelskie, pp. 228-242.
- Greń P and Postuszny Ł (2011) Społeczny wymiar kultury fizycznej w obozach koncentracyjnych. *Rita Baum* 24, pp. 54-58.
- Greń P and Postuszny Ł (2012) *Pytanie o pamięć. Relacje autobiograficzne więźniów obozów koncentracyjnych*, Krakow: Aureus.
- Goffman E (1961) *Asylums: essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books.
- Hirsch M and Spitzer L (2009) *The witness in the archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies*. *Memory Studies* 2(2), pp. 151–170.
- Hodder I (2012) *Entangled: an archaeology of the relationships between humans and things*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Jagoda Z, Kłodziński S and Masłowski J (1984) *Więźniowie Oświęcimia*. Kraków - Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Karpiński Z (2009) Od teorii wymiany społecznej do teorii relacji międzygrupowych: socjologia teoretyczna Petera M. Blaua. In: Blau PM *Wymiana i władza w życiu społecznym*. Kraków: Nomos, pp. I–XLIV.
- Kidron CA (2012) *Silent legacies of trauma: a comparative study of Cambodian Canadian and Israeli holocaust trauma descendant memory work*. In: Argenti N and Schramm K (eds) *Remembering Violence: Anthropological Perspectives on Intergenerational Transmission*. New York: Berghahn

Books, pp. 185–220.

Kopytoff I (1986) *The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process*. In: Appadurai A (ed.) *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 64–91.

Kowalski P (2000) *Chleb nasz powszedni. O pieczywie w obrzędach, magii, literackich obrazach i opiniach dietetyków*. Wrocław: Ossolineum.

Krajewski M (2013) *Są w życiu rzeczy. Szkice z socjologii przedmiotów*. Warszawa: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana.

Kwiatkowski J (1966) *485 dni na Majdanku*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Lubelskie.

Latour B (2005) *Reassembling the social: an introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rawicki J and Ellis C (2009) *Jerry Rawicki oral history interview by Carolyn Ellis, July 1, 2009*, pp. 1–55.

Available at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1154&context=hgstud_oh

Rawicki J and Ellis C (2011) Lechem Hara (Bad Bread), Lechem Tov (Good Bread): Survival and Sacrifice During the Holocaust. *Qualitative Inquiry* 17(2), pp. 155–157.

Somashekhar MH (2014) *Diversity through homophily?* The paradox of how increasing similarities between recruiters and recruits can make an organization more diverse. *MCGILL SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW* 4, pp. 1–18.

(1988) *Przeciw przemocy*. In: Tarasiewicz K (ed) *My z Majdanka. Wspomnienia byłych więźniarek*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Lubelskie.