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Author(s): Anna Muller Source: *The Polish Review*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (2020), pp. 3-29

Published by: University of Illinois Press on behalf of the Polish Institute of Arts & Sciences of America

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/polishreview.65.3.0003>

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THE RETURN

The Long Road Home of Female Concentration Camp Inmates

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In this article, while focusing on non-Jewish female prisoners who returned to Poland soon after the war, I examine the place of female support and friendship in the years immediately following the Second World War. It is based on a collection of letters that Joanna Muszkowska Penson and a group of her friends began exchanging soon after their departure from Ravensbrück, in the span of seven months from May to December 1945. Oral interviews with three authors of the letters—Joanna Muszkowska-Penson, Alicja Gawlikowska, and Urszula Głowacka—supplement the letters. The article looks at the scope, nature, and role of this female support network in women's return to postwar life. The letters offer insight into the survival strategies that the women employed after their exit from the camp, which they based mostly on the relationships that developed in camp and continued after the war. The letters show how written personal correspondence served as a road map to recreate the postwar world, and to link the past with the present and reimagine the future while extending elements of camp life into post-camp life.

At 6 pm “Kiubasy” appeared—Iwa Rosińska and Janka Suchecka.
They returned from Ravensbrück, where they spent three years.
(. . .) They wear their camp pasiaki (which
make their life easier and help them travel for free)
as beautiful pajamas, sport outfits. (. . .)
They talk about their adventures lightly and with humor
(they summarized life in the camp in one sentence . . .).
Even a death camp one experience individually.¹

Maria Dąbrowska

1. Maria Dąbrowska, *Dzienniki*, “May 31, 1945,” vol. 3 (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1988), 10.

"I am very grateful for the kindness you showed Zosia in Ravensbrück. Your help for Zosia in these terrible conditions was extraordinary and we will not forget it. Miss Gawlikowska came to see me on May 27, she handed me the watch and comforted me greatly telling me about Zosia's return. In fact, just one month after her visit, on June 27, I received a wire from Kraków."²

Zofia (Zosia) Świdwińska's mother, Helena, sent this letter to Joanna Muszkowska soon after Zofia returned from Ravensbrück, the only concentration camp built specifically for women and the camp that the French Ravensbrück survivor and ethnologist Germaine Tillion called a place of "slow extermination."³ Zofia Świdwińska was transported to Ravensbrück after the Warsaw Uprising fell in September 1944. She left the camp in February 1945. From Ravensbrück, she traveled to Berlin, from where she traveled partially on foot to Vienna. It took her six more weeks to reach Poland via Budapest and Prague.⁴ The watch that Świdwińska's mother mentioned belonged to Zofia's late father. She arrived with it to the camp, but worrying that it would be confiscated, she gave it to Muszkowska, who managed to hide it. After the war, Muszkowska and her friend, Alicja Gawlikowska, returned the watch to the family.

Before the war, all three women—Świdwińska, Muszkowska, and Gawlikowska—had attended the same high school: Warsaw Queen Jadwiga Junior High School, one of the oldest schools for girls in Warsaw, Poland. They were eighteen years old when the Second World War began. Soon after the outbreak of the war, they became involved in the anti-Nazi resistance that led to their imprisonment in 1941, first in Pawiak, the most infamous Nazi prison in Warsaw, and then in Ravensbrück. After spending three years in Ravensbrück, Gawlikowska and Muszkowska knew the camp and the rules that organized it only too well.⁵ In 1944, when their friend from high school, Świdwińska, arrived to Ravensbrück, they were in a position to help and hide the precious family item—the watch—that she brought with her.

In this article, I examine the place of female support and friendship in the years immediately following the Second World War among former camp mates as manifested in a collection of letters that a group of women sent to a friend and

2. Helena Świdwińska to Joanna Muszkowska, July 2, 1945, Museum of the Second World War, Gdańsk, Poland (hereafter MIIWS), MIIWS-A-169-35.

3. Sarah Helm, *Ravensbrück: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* (New York: Doubleday, 2014), xxi.

4. Zofia Świdwińska to Joanna Muszkowska, August 3, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-41. Also, Joanna Muszkowska-Penson, interview by Anna Muller and Daniel Logemann, 2011–2012, Gdańsk.

5. "At its height, Ravensbrück had a population of about 45,000 women; over the six years of its existence around 130,000 women passed through its gates, to be beaten, starved, worked to death, poisoned, executed, and gassed. Estimates of the final death toll have ranged from about 30,000 to 90,000; the real figure probably lies somewhere in between, but so few SS documents on the camp survive nobody will ever know for sure. . . . An estimated 8000 French, 1000 Dutch, 18,000 Russians and 40,000 Poles were imprisoned." Helm, *Ravensbrück*, xviii.

prison mate, Muszkowska, immediately after the war. I focus on non-Jewish female prisoners who returned to Poland soon after the war. “Freedom meant getting away, rather than getting somewhere,” said Ruth Kluger in her memoir about her war experiences and post-camp life.⁶ For the women in this article, only once they “got away” did they begin to recognize the need to define where they were going and how to adapt to this newly recovered freedom. The article looks at the scope, nature, and role of this female support network in women’s return to postwar life.⁷ It thus examines concrete friendship in a specific context—strengthened under conditions of a concentration camp and continued after the war ended. For many former prisoners, this support was essential for their return to the postwar world, and in many cases, it supplemented and even replaced the help that the state was unable to deliver in the immediate postwar years.

Survival in concentration camps for both Jews and non-Jews depended on individual strength and survival strategies, but also on the knowledge that one gathered about how to negotiate one’s position in a camp.⁸ The abovementioned letter excerpts offer insight into the survival strategies that the women employed after their exit from the camp, which they based mostly on the relationships that developed in camp and continued after the war. The letters show how written personal correspondence was used to recreate or create a community whose members (authors of the letters) helped each other deal with the most immediate as well as long-term concerns. The women provided each other with useful information, such as how to find a place to live; which universities were reopening; where one could find a job, a winter jacket, or any decent clothes; where one could access academic textbooks; and finally whose family members had survived and hence could become a point of reference—these family members could be important points of contact for women still needing help in moving on with their lives. One’s existence depended on others and at that particular moment, contact with others was life sustaining. These letters served as a road map to recreate the postwar world, and to link the past with the present and reimagine the future while extending elements of camp life into post-camp life.

Clearly the support network the women created carried important therapeutic value and functioned as a bridge between their camp and post-camp reality. For younger women, the pre-camp world that they knew was the world of their

6. Ruth Kluger, *Still Alice: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2001), 136.

7. The collection is located in folder MIIWS-A-169 at the Museum of the Second World War, Gdańsk, Poland (MIIWS).

8. There are a number of important monographs that examine the question of survival strategies of groups targeted by mass violence: for example, Evgeny Finkel, *Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival during the Holocaust* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); and Christopher R. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 2010. Both books deal with Jewish survivors.

childhood and adolescence. Camps became a source of their identity and many coming-of-age experiences. This was the world where they had grown up, a world dominated by one gender, where they nevertheless experienced the whole spectrum of gender. It was their school of life, which, regardless of the fact that it did not provide them with sufficient knowledge about social norms and values, had to be used to reconstruct postwar normalcy. After their release, they had to find meaning and values in the world where trust in another human being was seriously undermined.

Writing letters, as testimonies of camp life and extensions of camp relationships, made new life thinkable. The letters can be treated as evidence of a process through which these authors (re)created for themselves their most immediate community (*Gemeinschaft*). These contacts were essential at the end of the war, an era that was characterized by a social vacuum, atrophy of social relationships, and weak or non-existent state institutions that were unable to help cope with an overwhelming sense of loss and trauma.⁹ One striking feature of the letters is the fact that the authors struggled with the absence of the recipient. Musing over the thoughts of Virginia Woolf, cultural historian Anne Bower writes: "Letters highlight the gap (physical space, time, emotional difference, slippage between sign and signifier, aporia—it takes so many forms) between correspondents. In letters we confront our ever-present awareness of that gap, while at times using distance to protect ourselves, we usually struggle to overcome it."¹⁰ The women who received the letters remained curiously present in the letter writers' lives, despite their absence. The letters help, as Woolf noted, feel "someone warm and breathing on the other side of the page" despite absence.¹¹ And that connection helped build bridges between the past and present/future not only practically, but also metaphysically. Correspondence served as an attempt to recover a sense of life, safety, and purpose, all of which were buried in the physical as well as emotional and spiritual ruins that the war had left.

This particular narrative emerges out of the letters that Muszkowska and a group of her friends began exchanging soon after their departure from Ravensbrück. The collection consists of sixty letters that twelve women sent to Muszkowska in the span of seven months from May to December 1945. The twelve authors grew up mostly in Warsaw, but also Lublin. They were socialized in larger cities, in middle-class (intelligentsia families) with patriotic traditions. Most of them attended schools for girls, and grew up in a homosocial environment, fed with patriotism and the romantic dream of adventure and social life centered on their commitment to Poland. While there are other such collections letters between fellow survivors, this particular one offers a productive lens on this period because its authors are still living and I was

9. Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga, Polska 1944–1947* (Kraków: Znak and Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2012), 97–101.

10. Bower, *Epistolary Responses*, 6.

11. Bower, 6.

therefore able to help in the process of reconstructing the collection's meaning.¹² Oral interviews with three authors of the letters who are still alive—Joanna Muszkowska-Penson, Alicja Gawlikowska, and Urszula Głowacka—supplement the letters. I read the letters to them asking for explanations when necessary of the events or people mentioned. I treated the letter reading combined with the interviews as a way to unlock their memory and bring back some of the details and flavors of the past into their stories. The information I received from them was the only way to recover the voices of some of the women mentioned in the letters.

The letters and oral interviews are supplemented when possible with memoirs and novels as well as secondary source material. The sources that are used in this article constitute thus a relatively narrow base. Because of this shortcoming, this article does not claim any right to being exhaustive but rather suggests a certain phenomenon, a microscopic view on the dialogue that developed in the letters, which had a normalizing effect on the abnormal situation at the intersection of war and peace.

LETTER WRITING AND DELIVERY

In her semi-autobiographical novel about life after Ravensbrück, Zofia Romanowicz discusses her postwar letters as constructs that extended war conditions into the postwar era:

The edges of the paper still show so plainly the outlines of my erratic cutting that it was easy for me to reconstruct the exact shape and size of my messages, although it would be hard for me to say what I put in them. Those letters had been written after our liberation, yet they not only had the look of clandestine messages written in prison but also, as I later discovered, had had the usual fate of such messages, for not one of them ever reached Lucile. They had all been lost.¹³

Many letters were lost, but the very act of writing and expecting a response gave the authors a sense of doing something, recreating ties, perhaps undoing the war.¹⁴ Not only writing a letter but more so attempting to send it out and finding a

12. For example, similar correspondence is located in Muzeum Stutthof in Sztutowo. Danuta Drywa, correspondence with author, November 2017.

13. Zofia Romanowicz, *Passage through the Red Sea* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1962), 50–51. Originally published as Zofia Romanowicz, *Przejście przez Morze Czerwone* (Paris: Libella, 1960). Stanisław Kłodziński, a former Auschwitz inmate, provides a good description of the importance of letter writing in camps. He also describes the language and various tricks that inmates used in order to pass to their families some information that was officially banned. Apparently passing secret messages in legal letters—something that depended on a level of intimacy between the authors—was as popular as sending secret letters, in other words, *grypsy*. Stanisław Kłodziński, “Merytoryczne i psychologiczne znaczenie oświęcimskich listów obozowych,” *Przegląd Lekarski* 47, no. 1 (1990): 33–50.

14. Bower states in her exploration of various epistolary responses that letters engage “the act of writing and writing as act.” Bower, *Epistolary Responses*, 3.

way for it to reach its recipient inspired mobility and hence life. "And we are alive, exist, write to each other," wrote Tadeusz Borowski, a concentration camp survivor and poet, to his friend Tadeusz Sołtan in February 1946.¹⁵ His letter expressed joy due to their mutual survival, but there was also joy at the possibility of writing, communicating, living: the very act of writing, the very act of being able to express oneself meant life.

According to Stefania Skwarczyńska, a theoretician of Polish literature, the act of writing a letter depends as much on the person writing as on the recipient. Letters are a result of the interactions between at least two people: they can take a form of a conversation and a confession, a dialogue and a monologue at the same time.¹⁶ This dual nature of a letter suits the needs of former camp prisoners well. They satisfied their need to obtain information while providing themselves with a chance to write about their experience from a distance of time and space. Therefore, the letters were a curious combination of private and public, of monologue and dialogue, of self-centeredness as an attempt and a desire to reconstruct life with others and through others.

After the war, Borowski kept searching for his fiancée through intense correspondence. She was with him in Auschwitz and he lost touch with her in 1945. He called that form of communicating via letters *Auschwitz style*, communication based on a chain of exchanges: "First to a certain lady somewhere near London, that lady will send the letter to that other one whose address you gave, and that second one will probably be so good as to give it to you."¹⁷ The majority of the letters that this article is based on reached their recipients in a similar way—through a trusted person who traveled in the direction where a recipient might have been. "The person who will give you the letter, Dr. Izabella Niedźwiecka, is my high school friend," wrote Halina Kamińska, called Ruda, to her friend Muszkowska. "This is Bela, who was sending me packages to Pawiak, and now is my dear guardian. Joasinek [Joanna], please send me a letter through her. And if that is possible, please let her sleep at your place, because she is a very poor girl."¹⁸ If there was nobody to trust with letter delivery, the messages were left in the ruins where the recipient had lived prior to the war with the hope that some of them would occasionally come by.¹⁹

15. Tadeusz Borowski to Tadeusz Sołtan, Munich, February 22, 1946, *Postal Indiscretions: The Correspondence of Tadeusz Borowski* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 70.

16. Stefania Skwarczyńska, *Teoria Listu* (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2001), 6, 12.

17. Tadeusz Borowski to Maria Rundo, 21 January 1946, *Postal Indiscretions*, 91.

18. Halina Kamińska [Ruda] to Joanna Muszkowska, Grodzisk, July 14, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-37.

19. Halina Kamińska [Ruda] to Joanna Muszkowska, Grodzisk, May 14, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-46.

Sometimes they were left in various institutions that were slowly returning to life, for example, a radio station or the Polish Red Cross.²⁰

The return to life of some prewar institutions—for example, post offices—began already in the fall of 1944 when the Red Army commenced the march west while liberating Nazi-occupied Poland. About 90 percent of the means of transportation that the post office used was destroyed.²¹ Because roads were destroyed, at the end of 1944, mail was distributed by planes to larger cities. Returning to work, postmen used bikes or horse carts, or simply walked to distribute mail further. Already in March 1945, the possibility of delivering letters via trains was opening up again.²² The fact that post offices began functioning does not mean that letters could be sent and received without any obstacles. Historian Marcin Zaremba, in his work on the fear that accompanied the rebuilding of the Polish state, writes about censorship, mainly used in the operational work of the security services in the process of liquidating the anti-Communist underground.²³ The letters under analysis were most likely not censored; many of them were transferred by hand, so they avoided the possibility of being censored.

POSTWAR AS WAR

Correspondence from Poland, especially from Warsaw, to camps was severed at the end of the war due to the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 and approaching Soviet offensive. The women were cut off from their main source of information about their families or even the cities that they had previously lived in.²⁴ Many of the women were released into a world they knew frighteningly little about. Letter exchanges

20. Maria Kamińska (Halina Kamińska's mother) to Joanna Muszkowska, April 6, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-29; and Halina Kamińska [Ruda] to Joanna Muszkowska, Grodzisk, April 11, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-40. Magdalena Grzebałkowska. 1945. *Wojna i pokój* (Warsaw: Biblioteka Gazety Wyborczej, 2015), 65. On June 11, 1945, a newspaper advertised that daily from 4 to 6 pm at the Red Cross office in Warsaw information about returnees was available. "Męczennice z Ravensbrück udzielające informacji. PCK udziela informacji o powracających," *Życie Warszawy*, June 11, 1945.

21. M. Dąbrowska, ed., *Dzieje poczty polskiej w zarysie. Materiały dla szkół zawodowych łączności* (Warsaw: Centralny Ośrodek Badawczo-Rozwojowy Poczty, 1988), 111–113.

22. Dąbrowska, ed., *Dzieje poczty polskiej w zarysie*, 113–115.

23. According to the data that he provides, in November 1944, the security services of the new Communist state read 700,000 letters. In June 1945, there were already eleven provincial and seventeen county departments where over three hundred censors worked. By May 1, 1945, they were able to censor almost 4,400,000 letters. Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga*, 21–22.

24. Non-Jewish prisoners had a right to maintain correspondence with their families, although different camps administered privileges differently. For more information about the circumstances under which camps were "liberated" and prisoners were released, see Daniel Blatman, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010); and Stefan Hördler, *Ordnung und Inferno: Das KZ-System im letzten Kriegsjahr* (Berlin: Tiburtius Preis, 2015).

between former prisoners began only a couple of days after they had left the camps and functioned almost immediately as a way to map out this new country that was emerging from the end of the war. The world they saw after their release was changed in unimaginable and unrecognizable ways. The overwhelming wreckage, violence, and destruction of state structures on many different levels characterized the reality to which many people were returning to.²⁵ The concepts of home, stability, and familiarity had to be reinvented anew. Even the shape of the country was new: new territories were being added, while some older ones were lost. Many cities were in ruins, and families were fragmented and scattered. Poverty and shortages of everything from food items to pieces of clothing became a daily reality.

Postwar destruction and the perception of the postwar years as an extension of war is a subject that for a while has been inspiring historians to keep asking new questions. The more notable examples include work by Norman Naimark or more recently by Keith Lowe, who writes compellingly about the range of war destruction in Europe, the massive loss of population, rubble, hunger, and depravation, all of which accompanied the slow and painful process of rebuilding. The scope of the destruction was overwhelming everywhere, but Lowe underlines that it appears greater the further east one goes.²⁶ He writes: "Perhaps the only way to come close to understanding what happened is to stop trying to imagine Europe as a place populated by the dead, and to think of it instead as a place characterized by absence."²⁷

One of the most significant recent Polish-language works that shows how dramatic the immediate postwar period was is *Wielka Trwoga* by Zaremba. This work initiates a new scholarship that looks at the post-war from the perspective of the societal trauma that was neither recognized nor dealt with.²⁸ Zaremba argues that

25. For a description of the scale of destruction in Poland, see Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga*, 95–97. According to historian Keith Lowe, "not only had tens of millions of individuals experienced the loss of friends, family and loved ones, but many regions were forced to cope with the extermination of entire communities, and all nations with the death of large slices of their populations. Any notion of stability was therefore lost—not only for individuals, but at every level of society." Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 26.

26. Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: The History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945–1949* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955); Norman Naimark and Leonid Gibianskii, eds., *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944–1949* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998); Norman Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in 20th Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); and Lowe, *Savage Continent*, 6.

27. Lowe, *Savage Continent*, 16. Lowe and other researchers go even further while reflecting on what happens when this absence is filled with fear or even ethnic hatred. In this respect, it is necessary to mention the work of Jan Gross and historians of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research who write about postwar Polish Jewish relationships.

28. For example, Andrzej Leder, *Prześlona Rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2014).

decentralized fear dominated social life in Poland soon after the war. This fear—caused by the potential attacks of bandits, such diseases as typhus, hunger, unemployment, and homelessness—led to a collective experience of terror and shock, horror and fear, and the state of disintegration and destruction.²⁹ He continues: “In 1945, Poles were mentally broken, although it is difficult to weigh their baggage of anxiety after these six years of war. Postwar estimates say that the war left 60,000 people with mental disabilities.”³⁰ As early as 1959, some Polish psychiatrists and psychologists, for example Antoni Kępiński, began working on the psychological effects of war and concentration camps, later identified as KZ syndrome. Between 1959 and 1961, a team of psychiatrists investigated one hundred former Auschwitz prisoners.³¹ Zaremba argues that these early research phases suggest that some postwar responses led to an increase of alcoholism and intensification of religious life.³² Maria Orwid, another psychiatrist, researched problems of post-camp adaptation.³³ “Her observations showed that the postwar adjustment of former prisoners seemed to be more difficult for them than their adjustment to the camp.”³⁴

But was there anything in the war experience that could be salvaged as a path to the transition from the prewar to postwar era? Did the prisoners manage to develop skills, relationships, networks of support that helped them to cross the Rubicon of the postwar? Opinions about whether or not friendships existed in camps are divided. Former concentration camp prisoner Primo Levi denied the existence of friendships in camps when he wrote that “here the struggle to survive is without respite, because everyone is desperately and ferociously alone.”³⁵ Similarly Bruno Bettelheim saw prisoners as “isolated individuals whose survival depends strictly on his own resources.”³⁶

29. Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga*, 90.

30. Zaremba, 108.

31. Adam Szymusik, “Badania byłych więźniów obozów koncentracyjnych w krakowskiej Klinice Psychiatrycznej w latach 1959–1990,” *Przegląd Lekarski* 1 (1991): 23. “The first results of medical studies on victims of World War II appeared in Polish medical journals as early as in 1945 and related in part to the general health of concentration camp survivors, but also, more specifically, to the medical consequences of prolonged starvation, both in concentration camps and in ghettos.” Jacek Bomba and Maria Orwid, “A Psychiatric Study of World War II Survivors: The Case of Poland Politics of War Trauma,” in *The Aftermath of World War II in Eleven European Countries*, ed. Jolande Withuis and Annet Mooij (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 223.

32. Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga*, 119.

33. Szymusik, “Badania byłych więźniów obozów koncentracyjnych w krakowskiej Klinice Psychiatrycznej,” 23.

34. Quoted in: Bomba and Orwid, “A Psychiatric Study of World War II Survivors,” 225.

35. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 88.

36. Paul Marcus and Alan Rosenberg, “A Philosophical Critique of the ‘Survival Syndrome’ and Some Implications for Treatment,” *The Psychological Perspectives of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Randolph L. Braham (Boulder, CO: Social Sciences Monographs, 1988), 63–64.

But the early psychiatric postwar research on former prisoners suggests that there is a different way of evaluating that experience as well. Kępiński speaks of the concentration camp world as *Anus Mundi*, a place where a man saw a human in the whole span of his nature: “next to the monstrous bestiality—heroism, sacrifice, and love.”³⁷ Kępiński saw the improbability, helplessness, biological threat, and automatism as the key features of the nightmare of concentration camps. Two mechanisms played an important role in counteracting these features: blunting one’s feelings and attempting to recover small elements of one’s former life. Kępiński argues that the weakening of the emotional reaction to the surrounding world in normal circumstances can be perceived as pathology. However, under camp conditions it was seen as a defense mechanism and adjustment to the camp environment. “Everything that resembled even if minimally different, non-camp, life allowed a prisoner to detach himself/herself at least for a moment from an overwhelming reality to be yourself, and not a prisoner-automaton.”³⁸ For Kępiński survival meant saving the remnants of the old world, and that was possible only when one met one’s angel in a camp: a human or a group of people who were able to extend to the other a smile, a good word, or a helpful hand. These small gestures had the power to open new perspectives for the future.³⁹ Some other scholars argue that survival was related to a social bond and hence an ability to retain part of one’s personality and self-respect. A Holocaust scholar, Terrence Des Pres, even claims that the nature of life in extremity is radically social, “based on ‘an awareness of the common predicament and of the need to act collectively,’ and that the need to help is as basic as the need for help.”⁴⁰

Kępiński approaches the problem of the importance of human contact and relationships in camps from the perspective of his own experience as a psychiatrist. According to him, in normal conditions relations between people are often superficial: “Under ordinary circumstances we tend to brush past people rather than engage with them (*ocierać się o ludzi niż nimi współżyć*). . . . It can sound paradoxical, but in the camp, people were less lonely than in normal life.”⁴¹ It was this connection with the world, love, attention, and friendship that could have saved an individual in the oppressive conditions while helping them reconnect with the world.⁴² We learn from some memoirs that human intimacy and warmth existed in camps and that many survivors depended greatly on either a single person or a small group of people and even at times directly attributed their survival to these

37. Antoni Kępiński, *Rytm życia* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1972), 11.

38. Kępiński, *Rytm życia*, 21.

39. Kępiński, 112–116.

40. Marcus and Rosenberg, “A Philosophical Critique of the ‘Survival Syndrome,’” 63.

41. Kępiński, *Rytm życia*, 114.

42. Kępiński, 112–113.

people.⁴³ Many existing camp artifacts, created as a symbol of appreciation for somebody or for something—pieces of art, such as birthday cards, tiny gifts created in camp workshops, and thank you notes—are a testimony to deep psychological and emotional relationships that developed between various people.⁴⁴

But as much as they are evidence of attachment, they also testify to the existence of a camp social structure. The most recent research suggests that whatever relationships existed in camps they were defined and dominated by fear and an urgency to situate oneself somewhere on the social scale of camp life. Camp relationships are often portrayed as based on barter of social skills, exchanges of objects, and even the exchange of sexual services that came with a position within the camp hierarchy—which guaranteed or at least prolonged survival.⁴⁵ The social structures of the hierarchy that prisoners themselves established help us recognize the power mechanism that organized life in camps, while emphasizing prisoners' individual agency. Scholar Joan Ringelheim, in her reflection on the gender experiences of the Holocaust, uses "the term 'maintenance' rather than the more customary 'survival' when talking about the individual's chance for survival." She believes that "whether one survived or was murdered was determined by the Nazis or by one's fate (that is, luck), whereas 'maintenance' was determined by the victims, to some degree."⁴⁶ Even if limited there was some space for choices in the way individuals treated, strove for, or avoided encounters with others. For some historians and sociologists, for example, Anna Hajkova, the exchange with others could be interpreted as a social space for making choices; for psychiatrists, such as Antoni Kłosiński, the same event could be interpreted as an encounter with humanity that had the potential to be

43. For more on friendship as a sustaining force in Auschwitz, see Barbara Milewski on Krystyna Żywulska, unpublished chapter: "The friends shared an optimism and gallows humor that sustained them. And they watched over each other; Zosia sometimes convinced Żywulska to eat her ration of bread, impossibly claiming she was 'not hungry at all today, I don't know why.' Żywulska only thought of how to get her hands on a pair of warm, deloused underwear for Zosia." The chapter in the possession of the author.

44. For more on the importance of these relationships, see Urszula Wińska, "Uczucia czynnikiem kształtującym postawę Polek w Ravensbrück," *Przegląd Lekarski* 39 (1982): 18–25.

45. Daniel Logemann, "Playing Chess in Concentration Camps: An Immaterial and Material Practice of Stabilization," *Rocznik Antropologii Historii*, no. 2 (2013): 291–308; and Anna Hajkova, "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 503–533. As Wilson T. Bell, a historian who studies sexual relationships in Soviet gulags, argues, heterosexual relationships were used to improve living conditions, but they were also a source of pleasure and a form of resistance in camps. Consensual and bartered sexual activity became part of camp subculture. Wilson T. Bell, "Sex, Pregnancy, and Power in the Late Stalinist Gulag," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, no. 2 (2015): 198–244.

46. Joan Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," in *Feminism and Community*, ed. Penny A. Weiss and Marilyn Friedman (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995), 338.

life-saving. But both interpretations suggest the importance of social relationships for survival.

Many others talk about the importance of various factors, such as gender, ethnic origins, age, or even socioeconomic standing, in the formation of various groups in camp life. For example, Ringelheim emphasizes the importance of female bonding for survival while keeping in mind differences linked to age and ethnic or national origin.⁴⁷ Interestingly, Ella Lingens, a German nurse in the Birkenau concentration camp, discussed the importance of nationality for trust. She worked as a nurse in the Polish block in Birkenau with four Polish nurses and a Czech Jewish nurse. They all got along, and only after she was moved to a German block did she realize how important the common cultural and social background was for the well-being of their patients. According to Lingens, it was due to the fact that it was easier to maintain a relationship, share longings and fears, and even understand the intricacies of medical treatment (especially in the situation of a constant shortage of medicine) when people shared language and the knowledge that came with the cultural capital they had acquired before camp life.⁴⁸

How do we translate the experience that we can conceptualize in sociological terms into something more individual? How do we understand how individuals dealt with that enormous scope of suffering in the weeks and months immediately after the war when the world that they were returning to was changed in unimaginable ways and the only capital some of them had was the knowledge they gathered in camps? In contrast to the majority of works mentioned in this brief literature overview, the letters show us the micro world that the women were striving to recreate that was based on trust and intimate and close friendships: the world that they based on the relationships that emerged in concentration camps. Paradoxically, the world that they created in the abyss of death and suffering helped them return to normalcy.

GETTING AWAY

Hanna Świda Ziemia, a sociologist who has studied postwar Polish youth, underlines that people in their early twenties wanted to live full and dynamic lives after the war. The calamities of the war did not affect them as much as they affected older generations, such as their parents. "They were still young, dynamic, and enthusiastic about their potential choices after the war. The war stifled but

47. Joan Miriam Ringelheim, "The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust," Museum of Tolerance, online Multimedia Learning Center, <http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=gvKVLcMVIuG&b=394977> (accessed March 21, 2019).

48. Ella Lingens, "Problemy narodowościowe w szpitalu kobiecym w Brzezince," *Rocznik Lekarski*, no. 1 (1966): 111–113.

did not completely quell their developmental dynamism.”⁴⁹ They needed to feel in control of their lives, as if they wanted to recover lost years through their activism and mobility. Their worldview—how they were raised, educated, and socialized—helped youth explain the war. Youth was educated in the spirit of the mysticism of the ethnic Polish victimization, which dictated that regardless of their misfortunes, they had to remain in their posts (*trwać na posterunku*). This helped them explain the past, the war, and suffering while bringing hope that these misfortunes would all end.⁵⁰

When reflecting on the end of the war, Czesław Miłosz wrote: “time is intense, spasmodic, full of surprises, indeed practically an active participant in the story.”⁵¹ For many women who participated in letter exchanges, these times were indeed spasmodic: moving, searching, organizing took a lot of time, and yet they were doing everything seemingly without any breaks as if their success depended on how fast they could do things. Years later, in a conversation with journalist Remigiusz Grzela, Muszkowska remarked that the beginning of freedom was busy. There was so much to do. There was an entire life to catch up with.⁵² Time was becoming an active participant of the story. After getting away, they felt the urge to get somewhere.

After leaving the camp, Gawlikowska traveled with a group of former inmates, men and women, many of whom she did not know previously. She was unafraid of these strangers and trusted them, although stories of rape by Soviet soldiers were circulating.⁵³ Along the way, in the yard of an abandoned house, the men found a cart and two horses, which they then used for transportation. On May 15, the group crossed the Polish border, then reached Poznań by train. From there, they

49. Hanna Świda Ziemba, *Urwany lot. Pokolenie inteligenckiej młodzieży powojennej w świetle listów i pamiątek z lat 1945–1948* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2003), 77. Świda Ziemba writes: “Even though they defined the reality similarly to the way their parents defined it, because they were less responsible for the practical side of life, they more forcefully displayed the tendency that I describe as a rebirth of life.” Świda Ziemba, *Urwany lot*, 77.

50. Świda Ziemba, *Urwany lot*, 107, 34, 58–59.

51. Quoted in Jacob Mikanowski, “Goodbye, Eastern Europe!” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 27, 2017, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/goodbye-eastern-europe/#_ftn2.

52. Remigiusz Grzela, *Było, więc minęło. Joanna Penson—dziewczyna z Ravensbrück, wychowanka “Solidarności,” lekarka Wałęsy* (Warsaw: PWN, 2013), 137.

53. Joanna Ostrowska and Zaremba, historians researching the scale and nature of rape by Soviet soldiers at the end of the war, notice that mass rapes began after the winter offensive. There were some rape cases already in January 1945 in Kraków and Poznań. “However, the wave of rape that came through in the spring and summer was, first of all, a reflected wave (*fala odbita*), the transfer of brutal behavior toward the German women to the Polish women. It came from the sea, from East Prussia and from Silesia.” Joanna Ostrowska and Marcin Zaremba, “Kobieta gehenna,” *Polityka*, October 16, 2013. By the spring when the majority of the camps opened their gates, the infamy of Soviet soldiers was well-spread. For more info on the scale of the rapes by the Soviet soldiers, see: Norman M. Naimark, *Russians in Germany* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 69–140.

traveled to Częstochowa in southern Poland, where one of the men lived and where Gawlikowska broke off from the group to travel further alone. She took a train to Niepokalanów, a Franciscan monastery, where people returning from camps could take refuge for a night or two. Unable to find an empty bed, she slept on the bare floor. In the middle of the night, she left for a train station located two kilometers away, catching a 4 am train to Grodzisk Mazowiecki, from where she planned to walk to Ojrzanów, which was another fifteen kilometers away. She hoped that somebody would give her a lift. She walked to a nearby church, but instead of help, she found out that Muszkowska's parents were no longer in Ojrzanów. Twenty-one days after she had left Ravensbrück, she realized that the one place she considered a shelter no longer existed. She had to keep moving and decided to travel to Warsaw. From Warsaw, Gawlikowska ventured to Chełmno, where she knew that her aunt still lived in relative peace.

Polish dailies occasionally published information about the difficulties of traveling: "disoriented crowds are roaming from city to city, camping near the train station from where they are eventually removed—they suffer hunger, cold, and poverty," wrote a journalist for *Życie Warszawy* in October 1945, while stating that at least if they decided to stay in a camp they had a roof over their head and some food.⁵⁴ Roads were full of people: around 1.6 million concentration camp inmates and forced laborers were returning home. Zaremba notes that by August 1945 just from Germany 800,000 Poles returned home.⁵⁵ Thousands of Poles and Jews were returning from their deportations, while another 2 million people had lost their homes during the war and were searching for new places to live.⁵⁶

Finding a place to live was an impossible task. Warsaw was destroyed. In a letter to his wife in January 1946, John Vachon, a young American photographer wrote:

This is really an incredible city and I want to give you an idea of it, and don't know how I can do it. It's a big city, see. Over one million pre war. Big as Detroit. Now it is 90 per cent *all* destroyed. . . . Wherever you walk here it is hunks of buildings standing up without roofs or much sides, and people living in them. Except the Ghetto, where it is just a great plain of bricks, with twisted beds and bath tubs and sofas, pictures in frames, trunks, millions of things sticking out among the bricks.⁵⁷

54. "Przed powrotem wygnańców do Ojczyzny. Kto ponosi winę za ich poniewierkę?" *Życie Warszawy*, October 9, 1945.

55. Zaremba, *Wielka Trwoga*, 357.

56. "Estimates of the number of refugees in Europe at this time ranged from 9 million to 30 million. Malcolm Proudfoot, in peacetime an urban geographer from Chicago, . . . [with] his colleagues concluded that there were in fact 11,469,000 people displaced in Europe, and 7,738,000 displaced in Germany, of whom the largest groups were 2.3 million Frenchmen and -women; 1,840,000 Russians, 1,403,000 Poles, 500,000 Belgians, 402,000 Dutch, 350,000 Czechs, 328,000 Yugoslavs, 195,000 Italians, and 100,000 from the Baltic States." Ben Shepherd, *Long Road Home: The Aftermath of the Second World War* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 61.

57. Quoted in Lowe, *Savage Continent*, 5.

Roaming from place to place in the hope of finding somebody or something—a job, a place to live, a purpose—the women were struggling to reconstitute their lives, frequently in places like Vachon described to his wife. The freed prisoners moved often between their surviving family, friends, and places: from Kielce, to Chełmno, to Warsaw, to Łódź. Travel was difficult. During the war, around 38 percent of train tracks and 46 percent of bridges were destroyed.⁵⁸ And yet, despite the difficulties, the sense of accomplishing anything was liberating. Gawlikowska traveled “by train, but it was an open coal wagon. Good that it was May; it wasn’t cold and raining. I had a bundle on my back, I was standing and I was happy that I was going.”⁵⁹ There was no time to rest. In the process of searching, the women tried to accomplish much more than just retrieving their past—the process itself was healing. It was May 21 when Gawlikowska finally reached Warsaw. She did not have time to rest or reflect on her past. In a letter to Muszkowska, she wrote: “I arrived very tired in Warsaw, where I spent an entire week. Right away, fortunately, I found Mrs. Zofia Chrościelewska and Walerka [camp friends], who returned a week earlier. . . . I lived with them at Mrs. Zosia’s friend’s home. The entire time I kept running all over town looking for family and friends, but I found almost nobody.”⁶⁰

Toward the end of May, Kamińska (Ruda), another close friend of Muszkowska, reached Warsaw. A couple of days later, she wrote: “I made my way to the ruins of my home. I sighed long and sadly, and we went to look for other friends. As usual we did not meet anybody, so we slept on stools in some store.”⁶¹ Kamińska was arrested along with her father and mother, Maria Kamińska, during a raid at Warsaw University, where Halina was a member of a conspiratory group. Her father was executed at Palmiry, a forest northwest of Warsaw and a site of mass executions. Kamińska and her mother were taken to Pawiak prison in Warsaw, from where they were transported to Ravensbrück. In the camp, she slept with Muszkowska on the top bunk while her mother slept below. As Muszkowska later recollected, it was in the camp where she, Kamińska, and Olga Nider became close friends. Kamińska and Nider were slightly older than Muszkowska. Born in 1914, Nider was twenty-seven years old when she was transported to Ravensbrück in July 1941 with her mother and younger sister.⁶² Kamińska was a similar age. Both began their medical studies prior to the war. Born in 1921, Muszkowska was the youngest, and yet as she recollected later, she clung to the older women.⁶³

58. Teofil Lijewski and Stanisław Koziarski, *Rozwój Sieci Kolejowej w Polsce* (Warsaw: Kolejowa Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1995), 29. Many train tracks on the east-west line were opened for the needs of the war front by the Soviet army. Radosław Gawek, *75 Lat Północnego Okręgu Kolei Państwowych, 1921–1996* (Gdańsk: Północna Dyrekcja Kolei Państwowych, 1996), 99.

59. Dariusz Zaborek, *Czeszałam ciepłe króliki. Rozmowa z Alicją Gawlikowską—Świerczyńską* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2014), 207–208.

60. Alicja Gawlikowska to Joanna Muszkowska, Chełm, June 13, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-17.

61. Halina Kamińska [Ruda] to Joanna Muszkowska, May 26, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-46.

62. Info about Aleksandra (Olga) Nider at straty.pl.

63. Joanna Muszkowska-Penson, interview by author, winter 2016, Gdańsk.

Nider had certain authority in the camp, where she was a 'block leader,' to use the nomenclature of the living quarters in the concentration camp. As historian Wolfgang Sofsky emphasizes, a block was a space of surveillance and a block leader had considerable power with regard to the distribution of space on the block.⁶⁴ It was a privilege that also granted slightly better living conditions to people who were close to a block leader. At some point, Nider, perhaps relying too much on her possession of power, however fleeting it was, hit a policewoman who had slapped her sister in the face. In response, Nider was sent to *Strafkompanie*, a penal Kommando, where she worked until the end of the war. From there, she was sent to work in an ammunition factory. And when the war ended, she was evacuated to Sweden.⁶⁵ As a result, when the camp opened its gates in April 1945, Nider was no longer there. The first letter that the two camp friends, Muszkowska and Kamińska, exchanged is full of concerns about Nider. While returning to her studies and the busy life of a medical student, Kamińska worried about her friends—those who had managed to return from the camp as well as those who were still missing. "Only when I work and have plenty of people around me, I feel well, but I cannot be alone, because I begin missing mom, you, and all the people who are so far away from me and I don't know how much longer they will be far away," she wrote to Muszkowska in July, two months after they had left Ravensbrück.⁶⁶

In the same letter, as an addition to a letter from Kamińska, Muszkowska received word from Anna Sipowicz, whom she met at Pawiak. Pawiak prisoners called her 'Golden Ania' or 'Pawiak's Angel.' In prison, she was hired as a dentist, a position that enabled her to create internal resistance cells. Released from Pawiak on August 31, 1944, she joined the Warsaw Uprising.⁶⁷ She left Warsaw with civilians after the fall of the uprising, and her subsequent return to the destroyed city was painful. Late in May after days of walking, she finally reached what was left of her Warsaw home. One of the first things these women did was try to get home to see whether they could find any signs of their families. The next step, as we see from the letter excerpts, was to recreate their camp networks. Orwid's psychiatric research confirms that former prisoners formed the main reference group and that this group was more important than that of relatives or other friends.⁶⁸

64. Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 67–69.

65. Joanna Muszkowska-Penson, interview by author, winter 2016, Gdańsk.

66. Halina Kamińska [Ruda] to Joanna Muszkowska, Grodzisk, July 14, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-37.

67. She was arrested by the Nazis in May 1941 for her active engagement in the war conspiracy. Anna Izabela Sipowicz Gosicka in Internetowy Polski Słownik Biograficzny, <http://www.ipsb.nina.gov.pl/index.php/a/anna-izabela-sipowicz-gosicka>.

68. Bomba and Orwid, "A Psychiatric Study of World War II Survivors," 225.

Their present was difficult and defined by the need for almost everything: clothing, a place to live, and means of support. Food was difficult to obtain and expensive. In Warsaw already during the war, communal kitchens (*kuchnie pracownicze*) began distributing around eight thousand meals daily.⁶⁹ The local press informed readers how unprepared Warsaw was to deal with returnees.⁷⁰ Problems with provisions (food, clothing, medical help) or special food stamps for camp returnees were occasionally discussed in the local press.⁷¹ “My health is not great,” wrote Ola (Aleksandra) Sztojer to Muszkowska in June. “I am coughing, my lungs hurt, my legs are swelling. Apparently [I have] severe anemia. And the doctor told me to eat well. And I’m just doomed to a free kitchen at the Social Welfare. In the morning—black coffee and bread with marmalade, at noon soup and a slice of bread.”⁷² Her letter points to the difficulties of getting basic needs met.

Various associations for former prisoners that emerged soon after the war’s conclusion were able to help in a limited way: former inmates received dinners or in some cases basic medical treatment (for example, Gawlikowska was able to go for a hot springs treatment to Sosnowiec, in the south of Poland).⁷³ In some cases, they received clothing. The women who were deported to Ravensbrück in the early phases of the war had to wear striped concentration camp uniforms, though these were soon replaced with civilian clothing that was sent to Ravensbrück from other camps. According to Gawlikowska, certain items shipped to camps in Germany came from Auschwitz and had been taken from newly arrived Jewish deportees, who the SS then either directly killed or issued prisoner clothing to for forced labor. Most *they summarized* that the women received in the camp had a white “x” painted on the back. Only on rare occasions and through camp connections could one receive an article of clothing with a mark that was easier to wash off. Gawlikowska brought a warm coat from camp that helped her survive cold winters. In a photo from 1946, she is still wearing it. The coat still carried the smell of good perfumes, and this smell haunted her as a reminder of the tragic brutalization that affected its previous owner, who was most likely Jewish. In a sense, it was a

69. Advertisement from *Życie Warszawy*, February 20, 1945. Grzebałkowska, 1945, 36.

70. See for example, *Życie Warszawy*, July 8, 1945.

71. For example, “Repatrianci proszę o wyjaśnienie,” *Życie Warszawy*, July 16, 1945. For a discussion about the problems that communal kitchens as well as various organizations that helped returnees deal with in Radom, see Krzyżanowski, *Dom, którego nie było*, 187–190.

72. Ola Sztojer to Joanna Muszkowska, Kraków, June 26, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-23.

73. Alicja Gawlikowska to Joanna Muszkowska, Kraków, September 19, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-19.

reminder of the past years, of the several years in the place that had been their home.⁷⁴

GETTING SOMEWHERE

Regardless of overwhelming daily challenges, these women's lives were dynamic. While recreating prewar networks, the women also planned to begin or return to their studies. They fit the general trends of young people. As an article in *Życie Warszawy* noted, within just the first two days after release, 777 people enrolled in a university.⁷⁵ They all perceived education as a vehicle for change and a driving force that could help them remake their lives. Their educational interests were often linked directly to the more recent past: for example, the majority of the authors of the letters decided to study medicine and often emphasized the connections between this choice and their wartime experiences.⁷⁶ They were constructing their lives in

74. Zaborek, Czesłam ciepłe króliki. Rozmowa z Alicją Gawlikowską—Świerczyńską, 98. For more on the clothing in the camps, see Bernhard Strebel, *Das KZ Ravensbrück. Geschichte eines Lagerkomplexes*.

"On paper, starting at the beginning of 1944, it was written that each female prisoner had an outfit consisting of the following: a winter jacket, a winter and summer dress (every two years), a leg covering (a sort of pants, usually for warmth or protection—AM), a petticoat, two headscarves, two shirts, a pair of suspenders, a sanitary belt (every 12 months), and two pairs of stockings (every nine months). Monthly pads/sanitary products were not provided. For footwear, every prisoner was provided with a pair of laced shoes with wood soles (only for the winter months) or a pair of clogs or a pair of wooden slip-on clogs. In reality, it was quite different. Already in the fall of 1942 there weren't enough prisoner clothes, to the point that in November 1942 clothing started to be given out from the existing stock of clothes from new prisoners. These clothes were marked with a colored cross from oil paint."

Bernhard Strebel, *Das KZ Ravensbrück. Geschichte eines Lagerkomplexes* (Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003), 189.

75. "Młodzież garnie się na Uniwersytet," *Życie Warszawy*, September 15, 1945.

76. In May 1946, in the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*, Maria Jezierska wrote that there were around 17,000 students in Kraków. Their situation was terrible. They experienced shortages with clothing, textbooks, even paper to write on. Many students were homeless. Only 1,700 students lived in dorms; in small single dorm rooms, even up to 5 students resided per room. Conditions in dorms were sometimes catastrophic, as there were problems with electricity and many dorm windows were covered with a piece of wood due to a lack of glass. Food was an enormous issue. Only 2,000 students were receiving financial support, 40 of them were former prisoners, who received around 250 zloty per month. A loaf of bread cost between 20 to 40 zloty, but there were always problems with receiving food stamps (*kartki*) that would give one a chance to buy bread. Maria Jezierska, "Cyfry, które krzyczą," *Tygodnik Powszechny*, May 5, 1946.

response to the difficulties they had encountered during the war: they often wrote that their understanding of people (including their exposure to the human body) gave them a strong foundation for the study of medicine. "Do not worry at all that you are only in your first year [of studies], because you will see how quickly these years pass. Furthermore, in the years you spent in the camp you got to know people better than we did and every good doctor must know as well as possible not only the body, but also the soul of the sick," wrote Teresa Materska, a former friend from school who stayed in Warsaw the entire war, to Muszkowska.⁷⁷

In the letters, some of the women only occasionally returned to their past, but when they did they perceived it as their school of life. Urszula Głowacka (nicknamed Urka), who spent the war in Auschwitz, stated in a letter: "Now when the camp is beyond me, I'm glad I experienced all that, because it seems to me that I became closer to an understanding of the value of life and the individual."⁷⁸ Their life choices were part of a desire to gain or create some kind of integral image of life, where professional and more personal choices aligned. In 1972, a psychiatrist, Zbigniew Ryn, wrote about the relationship between war experiences and the decision to choose a medical profession:

This important, maybe the most important period in the life of my generation, the 30-year-old doctors, took place during the last war and occupation. Often the most common memories of the people from this generation are about war, hunger, and humiliation. Did the time of inhumane medicine play any role in the motivation of choosing a medical profession by this generation? Did the experiences and experiences of early Christianity, raised from this period, leave no lasting stigma in the moral sphere of our medical generation?⁷⁹

The sense that the end of the war opened new social and political possibilities loomed in some of the letters as well. Some letter writers noticed and applauded the fact that their former camp mates, regardless of their social standing, had a chance for social advancement after the war. One of the women that Gawlikowska and Muszkowska often mentioned in their letters was an illiterate peasant, Natalia Chmielewska. After her stay in Ravensbrück, she returned to her village, where she soon became active socially and politically. Rather than interpreting this as a sign of a changing social horizon due to political transformations that Poland was experiencing, the women saw it as an individual's drive to renew life.⁸⁰ Being mobile and actively attempting to alter one's life was their cure for postwar problems.

77. Teresa Materska to Joanna Muszkowska, Warsaw, June 30, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-12.

78. Urszula Głowacka to Joanna Muszkowska, Kielce, June 7, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-13.

79. Zdzisław Ryn, "Czy Oświećim jest nadal rzeczywistością? Refleksje psychiatryczne," *Przegląd Lekarski* 1 (1972): 207.

80. Ewa Chmielewska to Joanna Muszkowska, August 16, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-27. The letter was sent by Ewa Chmielewska, a relative of Natalia Chmielewska (possibly her daughter).

And yet even though a sign of optimism on the surface, this mobility seen in the letters also carried seeds of deep anxieties. Interestingly, the process of reconstructing the world took a paradoxical form: it combined mobility with apathy. The women discussed the present, how they enjoyed it, or tried to enjoy it; however, they were weary of the future and reluctant to discuss the past. Krystyna Iwańska, who was subjected to medical experiments in Ravensbrück, wrote to Muszkowska: "You have to tell me at least a little bit about yourself, do not write about the past, write only about your present life."⁸¹ Silencing the camp is a common thread throughout most of the letters. In her book-length interview, Muszkowska revealed that the past was something she and her husband never discussed, even though he knew that she had been imprisoned. There was no need to do so. Only after his death did she discover his past: during the war he had lived and worked in the Warsaw ghetto, where he headed the Department of Infectious Disease. There he treated patients but also performed scientific research on the clinical course of typhus.⁸² Both past and future, while important, were somehow erased from their lives. Both were sore wounds.

According to Świda Ziemba this was a typical reaction. After the war, one's past experiences in concentration camps was simply not a topic of discussion. The war was like a distant lesson—terrible but closed. The postwar era was supposed to be for catching up with life and making up for lost time. It was supposed to be a time for being strong and healing wounds. Świda Ziemba talks about her friends from postwar school: "Sala Herszenberg experienced the ghetto, Luba Lido somehow survived, Elżka Jankowska experienced the Warsaw Uprising, and Krystyna Skolecka returned from Kazakhstan. They said nothing about their past. I think this was something that characterized this time period. Asking questions seemed insensitive."⁸³

But while the past was closed as a distant and too-painful-to-discuss chapter, the women found it difficult to enter into any relationship with people who had not experienced concentration camps and referred to them as people from freedom (*ludzie wolnościowi*). For example, Głowacka wrote that the "people from freedom spoke some strange language."⁸⁴ Her father, a prewar policeman, was killed in Ostaszów in 1940. She was arrested in November 1942 and was sent from Pawiak to Auschwitz-Birkenau (where in 1943 her mother died in the death

81. Krystyna Iwańska to Joanna Muszkowska, October 9, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-22.

82. Grzela, *Było, więc minęło*. Jerzy Szapiro, "Tajne studia medycyny w getcie. Szczypota narracji, garść refleksji," *Encyklopedia Medyków Powstania Warszawskiego*, <http://lekarzepowstania.pl/tajne-studia-medyczne/tajne-studia-medycyny-w-getcie/>.

83. Świda Ziemba, *Urwany lot*, 90–91. She does notice, however, that not asking questions contributed to the silence around the Holocaust. She emphasizes that not exploring the topic allowed for conserving certain stereotypes and anti-Semitic stances.

84. Urszula Głowacka to Joanna Muszkowska, Kraków, August 15, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-14.

block).⁸⁵ Aleksandra (Ola) Sztojer, slightly older than Muszkowska and Gawlikowska, was perhaps the most disappointed with life after release. After the war, Sztojer and Gawlikowska lived together in abject poverty in Kraków. They ate dark bread with beet marmalade, similar to what they ate in Ravensbrück. While helping Gawlikowska study medicine Sztojer seemed depressed. In July, she wrote to Muszkowska:

Joanna, I want so badly for our relationship to last for the rest of our lives. That something we experienced behind wires connected us with a much more permanent knot than the biggest friendships or love in freedom (*miłości wolnościowe*). . . . These images that we cultivated in the camp, in our memories and hearts, are pictures of the past. We forgot that life went its own way without us, that people individually shaped their lives—regardless of our existence, we longed for some dreams, idealized visions that were illusions. The reality is completely different.⁸⁶

Sztojer longed for the depth that camp relationships carried, depth to which Kępiński referred to when he spoke about the “engaging with people” rather than brush past them.⁸⁷ She juxtaposed them with their pre-camp relationships that they dreamed about in the camp, but which disappointed the way reality always disappoints the imagination. They disappoint not only because the people in freedom are incapable of understanding camp experiences but also because the camp pushed them on a different path of moral development.

What has passed, what “happened” without us, without our complicity, created between us and people from freedom a wall that we can never cross. For us, the question of life was something completely different than for them, we made plans for the future, which were not always, or rather rarely, concerned with our own personal happiness. . . . We experienced the tragedies of our brothers and sisters deeply, and others played the role of spectators in a theater. They saw, they were aware of what was happening, they even cared temporarily. . . . Joanna, can you understand that these people had fun when blood was being spilled?

The experiences they shared in camps, the exposure to the suffering of others, and the participation in this suffering opened them to a different understanding of what life is, which distinguished them from people who remained in freedom. They distinguished themselves as people who in contrast to many spectators around

85. Joanna Muszkowska-Penson, email exchange with author, December 2015. Głowacka is mentioned in Aleksander Kamiński's book: *Kamienie na Szaniec* (Stones for the Rampart), which over the years has become part of a canon of recommended books for Polish youth. See The Oral History Archive of the Warsaw Rising Museum, http://ahm.1944.pl/Urszula_Plenkiewicz/2. Urszula Głowacka to Joanna Muszkowska, Kielce, June 7, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-13.

86. Aleksandra Sztojer to Joanna Muszkowska, Kraków, 16 July 1945, MIIWS-A-169-15.

87. Kępiński, *Rytm Życie*, 114.

them experienced the war deeply. There is even a hint of an accusation, that not more was done to help them.

The blood of our brothers and sisters? Can you understand that these people squandered money for vodka and biscuits while thousands of our sisters and brothers starved to death? . . . How can we ever understand these people if they do not understand us completely? How can I normally talk with a woman who, seeing me eating a slice of dark bread, asks me scornfully: "how can you eat such a dirty thing, after all this bread is bitter." And I replied: "it tastes great to me, for a long time I ate only potato peels." There was a hearty burst of laughter and among the laughter, a choked question: "how did they taste?"⁸⁸

These letters reveal how their incomparable experiences divided them deeply. Being misunderstood, even if they knew the root of that misunderstanding, caused painful rejection. "Joanna, I am 150 years old, I am totally rotten, rotten from the inside out," she wrote further in the same letter.⁸⁹ Sztojer was clearly torn between being misunderstood and longing for restored trust and sense of belonging. "I am terribly alone, freedom crushes me mercilessly with its weight. I am so free that every night I can sleep under a different roof, a bridge, or a patch of sky and no one will ask me 'where have you been?'"⁹⁰ The deep chasm between them and those who did not share the same experience often translated into loneliness. In such moments, the need to feel the presence even if via letters of physically absent camp friends was particularly strong.

The years spent in camps were intense, and, as a result, perhaps contact with those who had similar experiences was so important. It was also important for the reestablishment of values. In the letters, the women often discussed the world of pure or clearly defined values that they were searching for after they left the camp, an appreciation for which they were able to find among themselves but not among the people who never experienced camps. "We are living in strange times, Zosia! We are told how much to charge for goods and what to believe in. It seems to me that we are in the midst of a terrible ideological void."⁹¹ The openness that they present stands in contrast to their demand for black and white, clearly defined moral values. Perhaps it was the camp complexity, ambiguity between morality and survival, that pushed them to expect clear moral principles in the post-camp world.

"I am telling you, only people from a camp (*lager*) are ideal," Iwańska wrote on a postcard to Muszkowska in June 1945.⁹² Camp relationships, even if idealized, evolved into a network of trust and support. It was the common experience and the possibility of remaining silent without being estranged that contributed to a mutual

88. Aleksandra Sztojer to Joanna Muszkowska, Kraków, July 16, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-15.

89. Aleksandra Sztojer to Joanna Muszkowska, Kraków, July 16, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-15.

90. Aleksandra Sztojer to Joanna Muszkowska, Kraków, June 26, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-23.

91. *Postal Indiscretions*, 59.

92. Krystyna Iwańska to Joanna Muszkowska, Kielce, June 7, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-20.

sense of closeness. For example, when she was alone, Kamińska desperately began to miss her friends.⁹³ In their correspondence, they often expressed sincere, heartfelt feelings for each other. The women addressed each other using tender words: “I am not looking at you, nor into your eyes. It’s too bad that I cannot do it. It is just your eyes that I kiss the most. I look forward to your letter as eagerly and as impatiently as you were always waiting for me,” wrote Sztojer.⁹⁴ Kamińska stated: “I am kissing you in both eyes—mine and the one that belongs to Olga.”⁹⁵ A tender intimacy and half-childish sweetness is nevertheless undergirded by earnestness.

Decades later in an interview, Gawlikowska said: “You know, the feelings between the women in the camp were compounded by a lack of everything, and there was also a gentle accent of repressed sexuality. This was a reason for this intensification of friendly feelings. But this is natural, so it has to be, this is not surprising.”⁹⁶ She further underlined that Polish women never crossed any boundaries. “Maybe it was religion, maybe upbringing,” she continued. Gawlikowska may have been more outspoken regarding sexuality than many other former women camp inmates, but it is probably safe to assume that even if intimate relationships occurred between women, they were situational. “More than the need for sexual contact, these relationships reflected the desire for the warmth of another’s body.”⁹⁷ The possibility of being noticed offered them a certain visibility as a woman, as a person who was both taken care of and able to care of others.

Moreover, in some milieus of women of this generation (born in the 1920s) adolescence was very often experienced apart from men. Women were socialized in a homosocial environment in close bonds with other females—either their friends, teachers, or other family members. Social life often unfolded in spheres separate from those occupied by men: participating in organizations only for girls, attending schools for girls, and rarely socializing with boys. Świda Ziemia defines this kind of relationship as sentimentalism, the perception that women had to have a close

93. Halina Kamińska [Ruda] to Joanna Muszkowska, Grodzisk, July 14, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-37.

94. Aleksandra Sztojer to Joanna Muszkowska, September 15, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-24.

95. Halina Kamińska [Ruda] to Joanna Muszkowska, Warsaw, July 26, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-38.

96. Zaborek, Czeszałam ciepłe króliki. Rozmowa z Alicją Gawlikowską—Świerczyńską, 72–73.

97. Theresa A. Severance, “The Prison Lesbian Revisited,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 17 (2004): 39–57. See also, R. S. Jones, “Coping with Separation: Adaptive Responses of Women Prisoners,” *Women & Criminal Justice* 5 (1993): 71–97; J. M. Pollock, *Women, Prison, and Crime*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2002); and David A. Ward and Gene G. Kassebaum, “Homosexuality: A Mode of Adaptation in a Prison for Women,” *Social Problems* 2 (1964): 159–177.

friend to confine it. Strong and emancipated women offered fascinating role models for young women.⁹⁸

In her novel *Dziewczęta z Nowolipek*, popular interwar author Pola Gojawiczyńska talks about homoerotic fantasies between a teacher and her female students.⁹⁹ Set in prewar Warsaw, the book tells the story of a group of female friends. While men offer a thrill, and the possibility for a better future, the mutual presence of women offers emotional and physical support. The women dream and strive for education, privileges, and a better life in a world defined by predatory actions of men and misguided actions of their mothers and older women, who while mistrusting men, were pushing their daughters into their arms. One of the themes that the book raises is the nature of female sexual homoerotic desire. Literary specialist Agata Araszkiewicz emphasizes that homosexual love is presented in the book as impossible love. "Where does this (love) go, among these melodic sounds, from its basement (*suterena*)? Wherever it goes—it will always be too far, too surprising, too difficult."¹⁰⁰ Araszkiewicz argues that lesbian love was unspeakable and had to be repressed because it was self-destructive. Female love was fatal and hence had to be forgotten.¹⁰¹ While male homosexuality in interwar Poland was tolerated in certain circles (even without really acknowledging the nature of these relationships), lesbianism was taboo, partially because people did not really understand what it meant. As elsewhere in Europe, intimacy without sexual penetration was not necessarily perceived as something dangerous and, thus, was usually ignored.¹⁰²

98. Świda Ziemia talks about the homosocial world, *Urwany lot*, 153. I saw this trend also in the oral interviews I did for my book on political prisoners in post-war Poland, *If the Walls Could Speak: Inside a Women's Prison in Communist Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). While narrating their youth, the women, often talked about growing up in spheres separate from those occupied by men: participating in organizations only for girls, attending schools for girls, and rarely socializing with boys. At the same time, they were fascinated by strong and emancipated women present in their lives. Depending on the circumstances, this could have been a female teacher, an emancipated family member, or even their mother. For one of the women I interviewed (Ruta Czaplińska, a member of National Military Alliance [NZW]), it was her aunt who had traveled around the world; for Ewa Ludkiewicz, her own mother who led a life independent from the life of her family and husband; for Barbara Otwinowska, her aunt Maria Ossowska, a prolific sociology professor. They often talked about "being in love with them."

99. Pola Gojawiczyńska, *Dziewczęta z Nowolipek* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Zielona Sowa, 2005).

100. Agata Araszkiewicz, *Rozkwit kobiecego pisania w dwudziestoleciu wojennym* (Łódź: Lupa Obscura, 2014), 136.

101. Araszkiewicz, "Czarna intymność Dziewcząt z Nowolipek Poli Gojawiczyńskiej," 162–163.

102. See for example, Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1988). Well-known is the story of two writers, Maria Konopnicka and Maria Dulębianka, who lived together for years and were considered close friends. Krzysztof Tomasiak, *Homobiografie* (Warsaw: Krytyka Polityczna, 2014), 24–25, 57.

For many of the women, and such was certainly the case of the authors of the letters in this collection, despite everything terrible that happened while living in a camp, camp life meant intimacy, but also growing, maturing, and changing in a homosocial environment. Camp friends and certain camp memories guaranteed some kind of life continuation, which the women were afraid of, and yet which they longed for. In her interview, Gawlikowska writes: "The camp was a large city, a huge community that lived together for years, clans were formed and played roles of acquaintances. Older friends looked after the younger ones, and when they worked well, one had to stick to this work. Young girls had so-called camp mothers. They attached themselves to one person. In the block I saw that the old lady looks after the young—they talk to each other, prepare dinner, eat together."¹⁰³ Muszkowska and Gawlikowska both had a so-called camp mother, an older woman who surrounded them with care. But as Gawlikowska emphasized, it was not only care that these women provided but also tenderness. "If one does not have family or anybody close and one meets somebody positive and worth trusting, the need for tenderness comes. Obviously, people in the camp feel the lack of closeness, love, and friendship."¹⁰⁴

With this connection between younger and older women came also a natural transfer of knowledge; for younger women, older women were the only source of knowledge about camp life. This finds its most revealing reflection in Romanowicz's semi-autobiographical novel, when she reveals the stories that she heard from her bunkmate, and ultimately her friend. Night conversations opened to her the world of sexuality and love between men and women, a world that she could not know while in the camp, a world that she was too young for, and finally, a world that she learned about from her older friend in camp, Lucile. "I was afraid. But at the same time, in a way, I was happy. Now that I was inside the protective globe that had unexpectedly opened to me and allowed me to enter the very heart of their [Paul and Lucile's] warm intimacy, I wanted to live—even in the camp, even if only in the camp. Having this, there was nothing I could not endure. By taking over my life and joining it to hers, Lucile was saving us both."¹⁰⁵ Lucile taught Romanowicz about love, male-female relationships, and life. Lucile was there when Romanowicz got her first period and told her about its significance.¹⁰⁶ Directly or indirectly, Lucile introduced her to the world of sexuality, while creating a common experience and planning for the future or discussing what a post-camp future might look like. A similar tone appears in the letters: "In my thoughts I am constantly in Łódź, a bit with you. . . . I am missing somebody who would understand me in all the most basic and important matters and somebody who would know me and my life the way you

103. Zaborek, *Czesalam cieple króliki*, 48.

104. Zaborek, 48.

105. Romanowicz, *Passage through the Red Sea*, 87.

106. Romanowicz, 104.

know it," wrote another friend who in a letter is identified as Lena to Muszkowska.¹⁰⁷ Sztojer wrote: "I think of you often and I recollect our long night conversations. Conversations about so many strange things. Do you think about many things similarly now as you thought about them when you were in the camp?"¹⁰⁸

In her novel, Romanowicz writes: "Arranging the blanket and getting the bed ready had always been my particular task: as soon as it had been covered with our blanket, the straw became our property, our home, and it was not a simple or easy matter to find a place to sleep."¹⁰⁹ What is striking about Romanowicz's recollections is not only the warmth with which she recollects her camp friendship but also the ways these acts of creating and recreating 'home' in Ravensbrück affected her when she attempted to recreate a home once she left the camp. The very act of arranging a blanket marked the safe space in the camp, a space that the women desperately tried to reconstruct or evoke in their post-camp life.

The authors of the letters were also slowly recreating their own space, but they did it with the support of each other and the memory of their camp experiences. "Joanna, I would love to see you. Won't you be able to escape Kraków for a few days? Imagine, I invite you to myself. I live very modestly, but certainly we will fit. My 'house' does not look like a 'house among roses,' but it has its own key, you can close the window (one) and the door. And imagine, the door in the hall, the door in the room, and the door in the washroom," Sztojer wrote to Muszkowska.¹¹⁰ As we learn from the letters, the women not only maintained contact but also often lived together. "I escaped with my camp friend Basia Zybert. . . . We live and work together and we cannot imagine how we will survive our separation."¹¹¹ Finally they exchanged information about their boyfriends, seeking in each other approval and emphasizing that having a husband is what society expects, even if that would never replace what their female community could give them.¹¹²

CONCLUSIONS

The reading of personal letters is a deeply intimate process that is fraught with many difficulties and requires constant balancing between our imagination that letters certainly stimulate; our critical thinking that pushes us to go beyond an individual case; and our preponderance to voyeurism, while asking what, if anything, we learn from them. Letters invite us to a personal and hence unique world. They are a combination of an internal monologue with dialogue. Therefore, they satisfy

107. Lena to Joanna Muszkowska, Radzymin, October 12, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-45.

108. Sztojer to Joanna Muszkowska, Kraków, September 15, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-24.

109. Romanowicz, *Passage through the Red Sea*, 87.

110. Ola (Aleksandra) Sztojer to Joanna Muszkowska, Kraków, September 15, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-24.

111. Urszula Głowacka to Joanna Muszkowska, Kielce, July 15, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-14.

112. Halina Kamińska [Ruda] to Joanna Muszkowska, Grodzisk, July 14, 1945, MIIWS-A-169-37.

historians' curiosity regarding the position of an individual in a particular historical moment—in the case of this particular set of letters, one of the most pivotal moments of Polish history: the slow and difficult exit from the war.

Reading the letters that a group of friends exchanged took me into a world that was small and big at the same time, familiar and terrifying, a world where distances between cities and countries were covered by any means possible, where gossip carried the value of real information, where knowledge was based on sharing, and where deep friendships could emerge between total strangers. The depth and topics of some of this correspondence shows the important therapeutic value the letters had for the writers. These close relationships were their survival strategies in the process of 'returning home,' or in other words reentering the world that they wanted to be part of, but did not feel part of as they left the concentration camp. The women who were the recipients of the letters remained curiously present in their lives, despite their physical absence. Letters helped to negotiate that absence, but it was that tension between presence and absence, past and present, something tangible and sensory as sharing a common bunk bed in a camp and intangible that helped them recreate new individual and often lonely lives in the unknown and often threatening post-camp and postwar environment, while receiving support from their former fellow inmates.

The last question that emerged to the surface when considering the importance of human relationships in dark times is the issue of trust. How was it possible for these women to begin trusting again or to continue trusting after years of experiencing some of the gravest horrors of the twentieth century? Perhaps, it was the dialogic nature of their letters that allowed them to maintain their humanity. Their social world—their community—remained the same through the letters; this was an element of stability in their highly unstable world. It allowed them to trust and to remain open to the possibilities that the future was bringing, even if that implied being vulnerable. Thinking about trust and the role of trust in societies, I follow what Carol A. Heimer argues about trust: "Uncertainty and vulnerability are the core elements of trust relations. What forms uncertainty and vulnerability take varies a good deal with the substance of the relationship. And although the canonical strategies involve decreasing uncertainty or reducing vulnerability, participants' choices about which strategy or mix of strategies to adopt typically are constrained by the features of their social worlds. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that trust is dynamic."¹¹³ Following Hemier we can say that trust required for the women to remain open and hence vulnerable, something that in the light of their experience was very difficult to obtain, but which they were able to do within their own circles.

113. Carol A. Heimer, "Solving the Problem of Trust," in *Trust in Society*, ed. Karen S. Cook (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001), 43.