

That Which is Absent

Accounts and memories of women
from the Warsaw Uprising as ready-made
but not used film scenarios

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In Polish feature films dedicated to the Warsaw Uprising – and there are surprisingly few of these – there are no women. Of course the nurses, female liaison officers and civilians do appear but always only as seen, never seeing, always symbolic, and not full-blooded, always serving, and never independent and separate. In short, if they are protagonists (in dramatic not historical sense) they are the protagonists of somebody else's drama, not so much devoid of a voice as not allowed to use it. Their narratives, even or maybe above all the ordinary ones remain un-represented, hidden behind the great epic narratives of the heroes (this time in both senses).

Meanwhile there is vast literature regarding the fate of women in the Uprising – hundreds of collected or published memoirs and recorded accounts. These stories, dressed in more or less literary form are often very private but also military, civilian and heroic in character. They give insight in the rarely recognised sphere of the specificity of women's experience. This does not mean that the accounts of women constitute a certain reverse or are located on the antipodes of men's memories of the uprising. They simply open up a new plane, that complements the accounts of men. This area offers a hitherto unexplored point of view. For these who after several decades discover this "other" point of view the experience may prove overwhelming.

In the film *Powstanie w bluzce w kwiatki (Uprising in a Floral Blouse)*¹ presented on the website of the virtual Women's History Museum we can find the following narratives of women who participated in the Uprising: *I was dressed in everyday clothes, none of us prepared especially for the Uprising. There was no hygiene to speak of. I went to take part in the Uprising as to a ball. I had a white blouse, beloved cardigan, skirt, white socks and sandals. Washing yourself was not so important, more important was not to get shot by the Germans.* These are typical accounts in the context of what we can usually hear from those who survived. A moment later, however, a shocking sentence appears: *We did not have our periods. I simply think that this was caused by the negative emotions. From among my friends none had their periods so this made the situation easier for us.* And then: *Allegedly I helped to deliver a baby. Allegedly, because I was in a trance like state. I cannot remember it precisely.* And to conclude: *Freedom means to feel that you are on equal terms with the others.* These few sentences reveal not only the specificity of women's perspective of those days; they show also that there is a need to listen to these stories which until now have been barely audible. Stories which are private, focussed on the experience of everyday life (both combat and civilian),

these are “micro-narratives” or “micro-stories” which would help not so much to create a certain assessment of the Uprising but to bring us closer to the understanding of insurrectionary experience in literary and symbolic sense. The need then refers to replacing assessment with description, restoring the memories of the down-to-earth, and not limiting oneself to grand history.

This gap might be filled to a great extent with the memories of women. Communing with these memories we find a few recurring motifs perfectly enumerated in the quoted phrases from the film. Firstly, in the accounts of women from the Uprising you can sense great attachment to what is tangible and physical. Their descriptions of events are very vivid and literary. Secondly, we are struck by their “corporeality”, focus on what is physiological – this is what seems so incompatible with the canonical, “heroic” way of speaking about the Uprising. This “corporeality” is down-to-earth and specifically female – it refers not only to simple hygiene but also to pregnancy, maternity, suspended menstruations and finally fear of rape. Thirdly, these memories are saturated with the sense of sisterhood, affinity with other women. And this is not a girlish affinity but a mature one resulting perhaps from the community of experiences, or awareness of finality, or extremity of experiences, as well as from the belief in the significance of performed role. Reading these memories allows us to think that girls and women at the time were in the first place “for each other” and not “for the boys” they served. In accounts of fighting women dominates the need for freedom which *means that you feel that you are on equal terms with the others*. In these stories women’s experience is not ancillary to the men’s experience (even if the nurses or liaison officers write or speak mostly about how they took care of the insurgents) – it had the same weight and at the same time, a specific trait being the consequence of sisterly affinity.

Still the films dedicated to the Uprising dictate a completely different vision of the role of women in those events. It is worth looking at four pictures, two of which to a great extent established and institutionalised the way of speaking about the Uprising of 1944. These are: *Canal (Kanal)* by Andrzej Wajda (1956), *The Columbuses (Kolumbowie)* by Janusz Morgenstern (4th and 5th episode, 1970). I would also like to point to the rather non-standard *The Stone Sky (Kamienne niebo)* by Ewa and Czesław Petelski (1959) and emblematic (even though unsuccessful) film by Morgenstern “*W*” *Hour (Godzina “W”)*, 1979). In all of them female protagonists seem strongly sketched but in the end the power of these images proves deceptive.

The most characteristic female figures in these films are the liaison officers: Stokrotka (Teresa Izewska) and Halinka (Teresa Berezowska) from *Canal* and nurse Niteczka (Alicja Jachiewicz) from *The Columbuses*. The first is the provocative blond beauty who in the words of Jacek “Korab” (Tadeusz Janczar): *can’t let anybody get away*. Anybody means no man. Thanks to her short conversation with Korab we learn little about Stokrotka but precisely enough to define her in relation to the insurgent and enough to notice that in the first place she is a sex figure. She does not care about conventions, she has a foul tongue, sunbaths naked, “smiles” to boys and commanders thanks to which she can get rationed cigarettes and English tea. Stokrotka reacts to Korab’s allusions to her conduct with the words: *clearly this is who I am and there is nothing I can do about it*, and then puts on lipstick (this act remains in a meaningful symmetry with Korab’s shaving in front of the

same mirror). However the girl's alleged dissolution is eliminated by the confession that she came back there from the city centre ("there" means the place without hope, where they will kill us) solely for Jacek, because she is *his liaison officer*. Once Stokrotka goes with Korab down to the sewers and decides to stay with him to the very end her true nature reveals itself and in the first place this is devotion and complete dedication.

Halinka seems the opposite of Stokrotka. Dark, dressed in too big a uniform, shy, quiet and subserviently in love with lieutenant Mądry (Emil Karewicz). This love marks all her actions. So once in the sewer it appears that her beloved lied to her, not mentioning the fact that he had a wife for whom he wanted to live, Halinka loses her meaning of life and commits a suicide. This difference of attitudes of liaison officers from *Canal* however is only superficial. For both of them the value of existence lies in love – final and faithful. They live for it and without it they die. In a similar light the death of the protagonist of *The Columbuses*, nurse Niteczka, who is raped and murdered by Germans is presented. When the German patrol finds her together with the wounded Columbus (Jerzy Matalowski) in a ruined basement, the girl understands what will happen and leaves the basement so the boy she is in love with does not have to look at the rape.

In all these cases women live "for the boys", protecting them, taking care of them, without regard for themselves and their own suffering. The lesser importance of their experiences is highlighted in the very narrative of the films. None of them functions in the picture independently; they are never "on their own in the frame." Stokrotka always exists in the context of Korab, Halinka in the context of Mądry. Niteczka on the other hand in the most dramatic moment is completely eliminated from the frame. When the girl leaves with the Germans, the camera remains with Columbus, downstairs. Of course leaving with Niteczka and watching the tortures performed on her by the Germans (presumably multiple rape is completed by a rape with a broken bottle) would be unbearable for the spectators. However, the point is not the question of the use of drastic images in order to truly present the experiences of women, but the fact that by remaining with Columbus, the spectator has to reduce and limit Niteczka's tragedy to the tragedy of the insurgent. The rape on the girl is not horrible because of the girl herself – rather her suffering it presented through the suffering of Columbus who cannot help her. Here, in the basement, experienced torture has a "leading" role in relation to the helplessness of a man. Woman's torture, hidden, impossible to show, naturally remains "supporting." Niteczka's pain, paradoxically, remains in a way servile towards the helplessness (and therefore also humiliation) of man.

Watching this scene we might get the impression – and I hope it is not only women's – that the removal of woman's experience beyond the frame is a kind of concealment. The spectator is made aware that the woman is a victim but she herself has no voice. Her experience is hidden and remains silent. When Halinka decides to commit suicide she asks Mądry to turn off the torch. Death takes place in the darkness. This pattern keeps coming back: only when the spectator feels that soon they will see female experience, the narrative "withdraws." Female protagonists of *Canal* and *Columbuses* remain symbolic figures sentenced to silence and service to men, narrative, myth. Even if – as Stokrotka – they are truly leading characters.

Such a pattern can be found also in the “*W*” *Hour*². Teresa (Ewa Błaszczuk) seems the protagonist of the film – she informs the insurgents about the date set for the Uprising, literary thanks to her the mobilisation takes place. But the girl does not think solely about the Uprising. She knows that she is pregnant with Czarny (Jerzy Gudejko), the unit commander. She does not tell him about it – she confesses to another woman. And again: the moment of their short conversation reveals the door to women’s experience. But again this door is quickly shut and we hear no more about Teresa’s pregnancy. The woman’s dramatic situation is pushed out to the closed, women’s world which – as the film suggests – does not belong in the world of the Uprising.

In this sense women’s experience remains untold – in the best case scenario it is barely signalled. It appears not in the basic fabric of the narrative but in its cracks which the spectators may notice but are not allowed to see what reality and type of experience the cracks might open onto.

This is the situation of all women involved directly in the struggle. But together with the tragedy of the fighters the fate of civilians was decided. The civilians, in films about the Uprising, perform solely the role of a crowd whose moods – enthusiasm and later despair – constitute the background for the actions of the fighters. Of course this situation is a result of the post-war propaganda. One of very few films which focuses directly on the experiences of civilians is *The Stone Sky* by Ewa and Czesław Petelski. In the theatre-like drama, we see a small group of people buried in the basement of a bombarded building. Among the “prisoners” there are two men: con man and petty thief Maniuś (Tadeusz Łomnicki), old, distinguished professor (Henryk Borowski) and women: caretaker Safianowa (Jadwiga Chojnacka), Hanka (Barbara Horawianka) with a daughter and a brunette Ewa (Zofia Słaboszanka). Closed in a stuffy, small room, hungry and dirty protagonists of *The Stone Sky* slowly start to lose hope for rescue, they get closer and closer to despair and madness. Their fate seems a meaningful metaphor of the fate of Warsaw’s entire civilian population during the Uprising, individual characters are representatives of individual groups of the city. And here for the first time appears the untold tragedy of mothers who “robbed of” their husbands have to provide safety and calm down their terrified children, the tragedy of older women who cannot deal with the horrible situation or of girls who try to maintain their youth and vitality in the situation of constant, terrifying threat to their lives. Also here for the first time appear relations between the women, a spark showing the community of their experience, not always easy or conflict-free. Ewa, who in these exceptional circumstances enters a relationship with Maniuś, is more vivid not as his lover but as a woman who places herself in the situation of other women. Her corporeality, even though strongly sexualised, has another dimension – we could say a more autonomous one, revealing itself not in the relation with a man but with other women and her own body. These women want to survive, physiologically, they have to feed their bodies with something, they sweat, they are dirty and down-to-earth.

They stop being “women in relation to men” and simply become people in a borderline situation. In the stuffy heat they undress to their underwear. But while Stokrotka from *Canal*, forcing her way through the filth in her black slip, even in this moment is shown as above all a sensual creature, women from *The Stone Sky* are devoid of this sensuality.

Exceptionality of the film by Petelskis reveals a certain problem of the Polish cinema – it fails at describing the experiences of civilians. Insurgents from *Canal* or *Columbuses* cannot answer the requests and complaints of the population of Warsaw. In both films the insurgents and residents of the city are separated and in critical moments antagonised. In this context the scene from the “*W*” *Hour* in which a mother of one of the insurgents despairs in fear of the havoc that the struggle might cause after a wounded friend of her son is brought to her apartment seems emblematic. Her son acknowledges it with words: *Be quiet! You do not understand!* Mother – a woman and a civilian – cannot grasp the call of higher duty. It is difficult to find a more telling indication of a woman’s place who – even though she remains on the battlefield – does not fight. Of course the propaganda of the communist Poland forced the creators to antagonise the civilians and insurgents precisely in this way, and present the insurgents in accordance with the right ideological pattern. And yet the scene shows one more dimension of how the insurgents’ battle was presented on the screen – it shows the division dictated by gender.

This difficulty which the Polish cinema encounters when trying to talk about civilians in the Uprising is characteristic not only for the realm of film. It is enough to recall the consternation caused by the publication of the controversial (even though by now a classic) work, *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising (Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego)* by Miron Białoszewski³. This text aroused radical opposition from some of the critics and led to heated discussions. The subject of the discussion was not so much the specific language of Białoszewski but rather its inadequacy or inappropriateness when used in reference to the Warsaw Uprising. Matter-of-fact, ordinary, “civilian nature” of the language did not correspond to the seriousness and dignity of the event. So the reaction did not deal with the literary aspect of *A Memoir...* but with what was appropriate, fit and even moral. The work by Białoszewski, its tone and material, did not fit the myth, the official canon of speaking about the Uprising (even in the times when the Uprising itself was a topic that was subject to censorship). Białoszewski presented the reality of that time outside the discourse of the heroic and the glory; through the style and content of the text he demythologised the Uprising. This demythologisation took place not through discrediting the actions and attitudes of the insurgents but through shifting the point of view towards the area of the “civilian nature” and privacy. This on the other hand caused a shift from the area of myth to the area of physicality and corporeality of the insurrectionary reality. Insurrectionary because related to the time and place of the Uprising and not the fight as such.

*And maybe it is possible? Because they say it is not. To tell. What one experienced. That is – what happened. Meanwhile we know it all only from stories (descriptions) and pictures. We even know twice as much. Because we know about everything that did not happen because it was invented by those who attribute the reality with a certain inconvenience or inefficiency. – I do not do it*⁴. In this author’s commentary the declaration of the writer’s attitude to the object of description (that is what can be called reality) and his artistic method is simultaneously revealed. This attitude is expressed in the radical attachment to the most basic elements of this object: to events, situations, visible images of things which are involved in the events. What is more, Białoszewski is not trying to fit the reality into a myth, into a historiosophic metaphor that would organise the work on the text, the selection

of material and its, let's say, modelling. Even if a metaphor finally emerges, it is something derivative of the fragmentary nature of the description devoid of a thesis. Of course Białoszewski does not conceal that *A Memoir* is literature bound in a convention. Nonetheless this is simply a diary, and therefore it is an attempt to faithfully record what we experienced; it is only an attempt, as the author is fully aware of the unavoidable mediation (whereas we know it all only from stories (descriptions) and pictures). But what matters here is not the faithfulness but the method or rather intention – about the fact that Białoszewski does not attribute the reality with inefficiency, that he relies on it, remembering at the same time that when talking about it he is in fact talking about his memory. Consequently – he gives up building a great metaphor and agrees to the fragmentary nature of his narrative, in a way placing it closer to “life.”

Maria Janion in her essay *Wojna i forma (War and Form)* on the one hand conducts an exhaustive and thorough analysis of Białoszewski's text and on the other mercilessly deals with the critics who discredited such an achievement as *A Memoir*. When writing about the “system” of the entire Polish literature and “anti-systems” formed within it she concludes: *Basic tension within the system and the anti-systems was set by the most important for the Polish literature as a whole opposition between “the official” and “the private”, between “the bard” and “the artist”, between “the fight” and “social service” and the Cause and internal matters and experiences of an individual*⁵. She notes how quickly the binding canon where the “military”, “heroic” and “bright” was superior to the “civilian”, “ordinary” and “down-to-earth”⁶ was acknowledged. She associated this special system with a literary pattern that she calls Tyrtaeon, rhetorical and military emphasising at the same time how easily such a pattern slides towards banality, empty form, inadequate in the task of grasping the reality. In the chapter *Ich nieprzeżył wojny? (Their not-experiencing of war?)* Janion recalls the words of Michał Komar: *The widespread and socially accepted knowledge about this period transformed itself almost beyond historical myth of the fight between Good and Evil, fight between the Darkness and the Light*⁷. Following this trait and adopting Komar's division into “myth” and “concretum” the researcher concludes: *In Polish social awareness and in Polish prose connected by bonds of mutual projections, the myth devoured the concretum, the myth defends itself against the concretum that poses for it the greatest threat since it contains the irresistible truth of the detail, experience and memory – not yet mystified, not yet set in the safe and easy shape of a collective cliché*⁸. This concretum constitutes the value of “civilian”, down-to-earth and a-heroic (not anti-heroic) narration. It is connected with the phenomenological approach to reality (according to Janion, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Alain Robbe-Grillote, phenomenological prose treats the world as what we see and not what we think⁹), which does not give in to the dictate of myth creation. Białoszewski's prose describing the time of the Uprising would be a great example of such a method (and artistic attitude). This abandoning of the myth and not its denial has the strongest demythologising effect. Denial would inevitably lead to a new myth and would remain within the same system. And the point is to leave the system, and find a new way of speaking and imaging that is not antithetic. As Białoszewski says: *Well... The point is to deal with life as it happens. To demythologise. To “emetaphorise”*¹⁰.

Why in the context of a discussion of the lack of women's narrations in the Polish cinema am I referring to Białoszewski and what Maria Janion wrote about his *A Memoir*? Both the exceptionality of the method and attitude of the writer and the reflections of the researcher may have direct bearing on the question of (non)existence of women's "insurrectionary" narrations in the Polish film.

It seems that Polish films on the Uprising usually serve the myth and metaphor thus abandoning the civilian, private, concrete experience that creates the fabric of reality. They do not refer to what happened but to how we should evaluate it. Protagonists of these films are always worthy of a monument and the demythologisation of insurgents in *Canal* is solely superficial because it immediately suggests a new myth, one that due to its bitterness is even more heroic. *Canal* – the film that in the strongest way shaped the memory and image of the Uprising – again constitutes a generalisation that governs the organisation of the plot. It offers an evaluation of history but does not speak of what happened. Its value was, is and will remain unquestionable, however, it is difficult to fight the impression that the power of this film was crucial in maintaining the canon of speaking about the Uprising. And deviating away from the canon it is still controversial. And again: the deviation does not have to mean formulation of another evaluation of the August uprising but moving to a completely different area (or level) of observation. That is it would mean moving from the heroic to the civilian. And in consequence, a move from "top-down" to "grass-roots" level, and so a move from the subordination of events to a certain vision of them, to the extraction of the vision from the events, micro-narrations and "micro-histories." The term – "micro-history" – as formulated by Kazimierz Wyka and referred to by Maria Janion is of crucial meaning here, since "micro-history" *is composed of fragments of real life not yet falsified by ideas, conventions, myths, clichés and stereotypes*¹¹. Wyka finds it *more difficult to remember than the great history because it does not give in to patterns*¹². It remains in the sphere of the concrete events and experience of reality and not its interpretation.

The majority of memories of those who fought and lived in Warsaw in August and September 1944 is in this sphere. Among them women's accounts have a special power – firstly because they often abandon the canonical tone and monumentality and secondly, because they reveal experiences absent or omitted in the official canon. What's interesting in its so often literary and fragmentary nature is the fact that women's micro-narrations become controversial and subversive. Just as the prose of Białoszewski. When the women who fought in the Uprising start talking about themselves, about being for other girls and among them, about the corporeality (and not necessarily sexuality) of experiences the listener may feel that a blind is being removed.

It does not mean, however, that men's narrations are separated by some inerasable difference from the women's or that men's stories automatically inscribe themselves in the "official" tone and women's always break out of it. A paradox sneaks in here: even though experiences of women and men differ significantly, at the same time they appear to be similar. On the one hand women fighting in the Uprising performed the roles appropriate for women; they were liaison officers and nurses, they took care of the cooking and provisions and did all the work "supporting" the actions of insurgents. They had to abandon the

pre-war status of girls from good families and yet sometimes take advantage of it to protect themselves and others. Moreover women in those days were forced to deal with their physiology in inhuman conditions, they were exposed to rape, they had to give birth to and protect their children. On the other hand, fighting women could feel that they had a great responsibility, that they were co-fighters. Accounts from this “area” of the struggle constitute an equally important record to the men’s even though one inevitably different. What is interesting, in the memories of women, is the ambivalence characteristic for the marginalised in their views about the canonic. Uncertainty and ambiguity often appear as well as the conviction that the experience has to be individual, that between what is black and white hide many shades of grey. This ambivalence shatters the impeccability of the monumental image of the Uprising, but at the same time it does not deny the obligation to remember. It brings this memory down to earth. Stories of women answer the question “how was it? and not “what for?” or “was it worth it?”

Accounts that I will refer to are usually “non-literary” even if the authors tried to dress their memories in the most literary shape. These often published (or written with intention that one day they would be published) texts may be treated as amateur literature. Or as literature grounded in life and distant from myth, coming from personal experience and not the need to evaluate or pose a thesis that the content and form of the account are subject to.

I will use materials that were both published and unpublished. Among the first the most important are the memories of girl-scouts from the 31st Warsaw Girl Scout Team (Warszawska Drużyna Harcerek) recruited mostly from pupils of the Jan Kochanowski Female Junior Secondary School in Warsaw¹³. An important source for me are also the interviews conducted within the project *Powstanie w bluzce w kwiatki. Życie codzienne kobiet w czasie Powstania Warszawskiego* (*Uprising in a floral blouse. Everyday life of women at the time of the Warsaw Uprising*) completed by Feminoteka with the participants of the Uprising and women who at that time were in Warsaw. I will also refer to two books published by PIW in varsavianistic series Biblioteka Syrenki: *Pełnić służbę... Z pamiętników i wspomnień harcerek Warszawy 1939-1945* (*To be on Duty... From the Memoirs of the Warsaw Girl Scouts 1939-1945*)¹⁴ and *W Alejach spacerują “Tygrysy”. Sierpień – wrzesień 1944* (*The “Tigers” are taking a walk in Aleje. August – September 1944*) by Elżbieta Ostrowska (also a member of the 31 WDH)¹⁵. I also found a special collection of texts in the publication *Życie w powstańczej Warszawie* (*Life in the Uprising Warsaw*)¹⁶. These are accounts collected as early as August 1944 by Edward Serwański within the action “Iskra-Dog”. Serwański, who at the beginning of August was taken away together with other civilians to Pruszków, escaped from the train station there to Brwinów where he decided to gather testimonies of those who escaped or were taken away from the capital city¹⁷. The incredible value of these testimonies consists in the fact that they are not memories, but accounts made “live” and mostly by civilians. They offer access to the area of experiences which is missing from the accounts of participants of the Uprising written post factum. Various scenarios described – fragmentary memories, vivid, autonomous, rooted in the concretum – constitute almost ready-made but still not used film scenarios.

Women for women, women among women

I had a real sergeant, do you know what a sergeant is? This is a primitive chap who speaks in a deep voice and gives orders. This one had to drill the girls and this was terrible for him and what is more he drilled these girls in a living room with a carpet. He could not shout because it was occupation so he made these noises, kind of grunting. We learnt the language, this: ouou turn to the left, ouou turn to the right, and it was idiotic. We did everything and since as I told you I was left-handed when he said "turn to the right" I turned left. It was horrible for him, I was actually quite good, I was very good at assembling and disassembling a VIS. This is not such a big thing since it is just a mincer. I did it very quickly so he actually liked me but for these mistakes during drills I had to crawl around the living room. And crawling is terribly unaesthetic for a woman because you crawl on your elbows and toes and since our breasts and asses were growing it was terrible, so I said: "I won't." And he got really angry: "The punishment for disobedience is execution." So I said: "so shoot." Later he wanted to smooth things out and sent a senior private to me. I told him that I would not be in the army because it seemed stupid, this turn to the right, turn to the left, it was not serious¹⁸. This is how Barbara Strynkiewicz-Żuromska, alias Romka, remembers her first "military" experiences. This fragment renders really well the specificity of the situation of women who wanted to participate in the military fight. On the one hand they joined the military service and were to be treated like soldiers; on the other those who were to train them sometimes had trouble with seeing women-fighters as their equals. And the girls themselves could not always forget what is aesthetic and what is not, and the specific ethos of a girl from a good family. However the situation described probably took place before the Uprising. Probably after its beginning majority of these problems ceased to be significant. But still naturally, due to the division of functions during the Uprising, experiences of women and men remained fundamentally different even if strongly connected. The line sketched so strongly between the world of women and of men was not totally abolished. Being a nurse or a liaison officer is a completely different area of action than open fight with a weapon (or without it) usually reserved for men. Girls thrown into the clearly defined insurrectionary reality of women's platoons of liaison and nursery services, additionally going through this unknown to boys symbolic, even though really physical, "growing of breasts and asses" in a natural way created a kind of community, community of surviving (and experiencing) the Uprising. A community in which the sense of dependency on the insurgents faded away in the face of equality or dependency on other women. Isolation of insurrectionary women fighters created a special situation of incredible dramatic potential.

Nurses

An emblematic example of such an existence of women for and among women is the story of the scouts-nurses who in July 1944 made a military oath of the Home Army at the house of Doctor Irena Semadeni-Konopacka, alias Konstancja. This extraordinary doctor was to become not only their guardian and mentor but also companion of insurrectionary drama. The scouts were assigned as line sanitary pa-



Canal, dir. Andrzej Wajda (1956)



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trol to the 5th grouping of the Home Army and initially were stationed in the building of the Social Insurance Institution at the corner of Czerniakowska and Rozbrat streets. This patrol included: Janina Bem (after her husband Dymecka) – alias Nina, Bogna Chawałkiewicz – alias Bogda, Janina Chmielińska – alias Chmiel, Danuta Remiszewska – alias Remi, Zofia Rusiecka (after her husband Kreowska) – alias Zocha, Halina Wilczyńska – alias Wilk, Henryka Żukowska – alias Żuk, Adela Bubełło – alias Ada. All were 16-17 years old. Since 16 August this patrol constituted the team of a field hospital managed by Doctor Konstancja (this hospital was under the command of Cpt. Kryska /Zygmunt Netzer/). In the memories written down in 1986 by the scouts of 31 WDH we can find accounts of three girls who belonged to this group: Bem-Dymecka, Rusiecka-Kreowska and Chmielińska. The authors also used recorded memories of Doctor Semadeni-Konopacka (she died in 1984). The participants of the Uprising when describing their experiences focussed mostly on the person of Doctor Konstancja.

These three accounts, so strongly intertwined with each other make a huge impression. In the first place because all of them refer to the same events seen from different perspectives. Stories of these women intertwine just as if the narrative was told from a number of cameras. When Zocha remembers that at a certain moment she hears Chmiel shout: *I can't see, my eyes are burnt*, in the account of Chmiel we read: *I could not open my eyes. Flame touched my eyebrows and eyelashes. Some sticky fluid on my face... Zocha who was close to me run to me and violently and categorically demanded that I pulled myself together and opened my eyes*. When Chmiel writes that Nina was injured, Nina describes how she felt pain and Zocha pulled her down by her feet to the basement. This story conducted from three perspectives sometimes becomes stratified: Nina lies in hospital, unconscious; Chmiel and Zocha face the choice: stay with the injured or go across the Vistula or through the sewers to Mokotów. They decide to stay. In the morning Germans come and tell them to leave the improvised hospital. Nina, lying among the others tells what happened in the basement: *A German asked who she was and what was there. She replied she was a doctor and that in the basements there were only civilians. The Germans went to the next basement (...). A German asked whether they were also civilians. Dr Konstancja answered that in the basements there were many persons she did not know but most of them were civilians. The German approached a selected injured person and asked him if he was a civilian. The injured in fluent German answered that they were all bandits, partisans and that he was a German from Silesia who was forced to participate in the actions. The German officer told Doctor Konstancja to write down in German all the testimony of the Silesian. Since she said she could not understand he started writing it all down by himself. He wrote two pages of testimony, put on white gloves, took out his gun and shot the Silesian first. Later he shot one person after another and asked Doctor Konstancja to confirm their death. Even though he was shooting from a short distance not all the injured were dead, some of them still lived. Dr Konstancja in every case said that the person was dead. In other basements the situation repeated itself. In the basement where I was lying a woman was shot, a young boy too and I was kicked with a shoe and my watch was taken but they did not shoot me. Despite being injured and allegedly in poor condition I was aware of the shooting in other basements*. Meanwhile Chmiel, standing with Zocha outside in a crowd of persons

gathered there describes the following event: *We were welcomed by blinding sun, crowd and a big group of Germans. They were SS and Vlasov army officers. There were the dead bodies of the shot. The Germans let the women and children go and a group of young people stood on a side. The Germans shouted "Partisanten, Banditen."* At a certain point a girl dressed in German leopard-print army camouflage jacket came out of the basement. Her appearance infuriated the Germans. One German slapped her, she fell, kneeled in front of the Germans and started to beg "Don't kill me!" With Żuk and Urszula we held each other's hands tightly. We stood by the group of young people directed there by the Germans. Meanwhile the German kicked the begging girl in the stomach and fired at her stomach. She was probably the liaison officer who came to us from the Old Town. This started further killing of the young. This way they shot around 40 persons. People lied 3-5 metres from us. We saw that they were still alive, that they would be dying for the next few hours. We stood there waiting for our turn. Thoughts crossed our head – will it hurt? – we must remember to shout "Poland has not yet perished..."

This three-way narrative dominated by factual descriptions of situations seems a live material for a scenario. The story told, due to the proximity of the three narrators, is on one hand very focussed and "local" and on the other gains features of universalism. In the girls' accounts we can also find descriptions of rescue actions (*We were rescuing a boy crushed by beams, the pulse was dropping, together with Zocha or Wilk the two of us struggled to take off his clothes, in the end I "shot" the shot through his clothes and this probably saved him when later with difficulty we managed to get him out*), and social situations (*Next to us at Czerniakowska Street there were warehouses of "Spotem" thanks to which for some time we had sugar, marmalade, sago, tomato puree. When the second warehouse was bombarded every one of us took a few sets of underwear so we could at least try to stay clean*), and account of the girls' trip from Czerniaków to the City Centre to deliver a few reports and inform the families that they were alive. Maintaining individualised, focussed perspective allows them to create precision and brevity in depicting what was around; precision and brevity which – again – lead towards the concretum and away from generalisations. Generalisation appears only at the end in a way "in the spectator's eye." But it is not to be found as an element of design or evaluation.

In accounts of the three scouts one more thing attracts attention: the sense of sisterhood, affinity between the women in a particularly difficult situation: they are in a way between the insurgents and the civilians and they have to bear all the consequences. Their guardian and authority is Dr Konstancja. She stops being just a doctor – she becomes a commander whom you fully trust. Bem-Dymecka describes in detail the constant fight of Dr Semadeni-Konopacka for her hospital in which she decided to stay even though she had a chance to leave (Dr Konstancja stayed there even though her nine-year-old son was with her; her husband and older son died earlier in the Uprising). Situation in the hospital abandoned by the insurgents was hopeless: *Radosław organised briefing for persons who were staying during which Dr Konstancja asked from where she was supposed to get water and food. Radosław told her to go to the Germans and ask for food for the injured. (...) After Radosław left Dr Konstancja went through all the basements with the injured and took off their badges, hid camouflage jackets and other parts of German uniforms. The next day the Germans came and the above-described scenes took place.*

Her subsequent efforts to save the injured arouse admiration and surprise. When the soldiers came with stretchers for the dead and injured, Dr Konstancja, disobeying the German commander, asked them not to take out those who had white handkerchiefs on their faces. When later the officers of Wehrmacht with an Austrian lieutenant came Dr Konstancja went to the lieutenant and in good German explained to him that those injured passed "the test of truth", that they were not soldiers but the German officer did not believe them and shot them from a close distance and yet they were still alive so God's punishment did not reach them. The lieutenant clearly liked this story because they helped her move the injured who survived. In the end she did actually go to the Germans to Solec Street and asked for food for her patients. She received coffee, bread and tinned spinach. She tried also to look for help among the delegates of the International Red Cross. Only thanks to her incredible determination she managed to evacuate the patients in the end. For entire October, thanks to a special pass, she looked for and gathered the injured around the entire city.

Her person is in a way a tangent point of the recalled accounts just as she was during the Uprising. In the memories of the scouts we can read: *We did not expect then the deep experiences that would connect us with Dr Irena Semadeni and how lucky we were that such a person was our direct Authority during the fight – Chmielińska; I preferred to go to the unknown with Dr Konstancja than go to a military camp with others from the Home Army – Bem-Dymecka. The commanders could give orders but it was Dr Konstancja that was the true authority for the nurses.*

Similarly strong bonds, even though different, connected the girls themselves. The fact that after forty years they were still in touch alone proved the strength of these contacts. While the insurgents usually remained for them (at least in these accounts) anonymous soldiers that they were to rescue, for each other they were the closest family. Not all of them survived. In all the three accounts appears the figure of Danusia Remiszewska, alias Remi, who died on 16 August when running for the injured. Each scout remembers well her last hours: hesitation whether to go to the confession, her smile with which she proudly informed them, that she was being sent to a new hospital. Zocha writes: *We are released for the funeral. I have to get the flowers. In a garden on the corner of Rozbrat and Szara there are red carnations but are unavailable due to shootings. The gardener refuses to sell but allows us to take them. We managed – and with a bunch of these red carnations we say goodbye to Remi. Red, fragrant, autumn carnations always bring this funeral to my mind.* And Chmiel adds: *we still had a difficult task. We went with Nina to Tamka to the mother of our dead friend – Remi – Danka Remiszewska. Mrs Remiszewska looked at us with pain and a kind of reproach when Nina gave her the cross and scout belt of her daughter.* Maybe this is one of the most representative stories illustrating the fate of the young scouts, nurses and liaison officers. It is closed by a touching epilogue: today a lock of Remi's hair is a part of the exposition at the Warsaw Uprising Museum.

* * *

Halina Gajewska, scout from the 31 WDH, on 1 August found herself together with a dozen of other nurses at the house of Prof. Mściwoj Semerau-Siemianowski

on Ochota, at Sucha Street (today Krzywickiego). She did not know the other girls, she only knew, thanks to a liaison officer who reached the professor's villa few hours before the hour "W" [time set for the outbreak of the Uprising], that all belonged to a group called "Dorota." They were to await further orders which never came. The Germans however did come but convinced by the professor that all the young women gathered at his house were just hiding from the shootings decided to "protect" the villa from the Warsaw "bandits." The girls and professor's family (his daughter, Bogna, was to command the group "Dorota") were locked in the house, bars on windows were fitted, curtains drawn. The situation was equally dramatic and absurd: a group of teenage nurses that hated German soldiers and were ready to fight against them together with the insurgents was considered by the Germans to be a group of scared girls who had to be protected from these insurgents. The situation was complicated further by the fact that at various nooks and crannies of the house, including the attic the professor hid a number of Polish fighters.

The girls were practically cut off from the world. During the first few days of August the phone was still working. So they expected the orders from the command to be sent this way. Unfortunately, the only news that came on the phone informed of the death of professor's two sons. Later the line was cut off. The only connection with the outside world were small holes made in the curtains – through them you could watch in secret what was happening in the street. Thanks to the observation they managed to establish that the Germans left duty for meals at very regular hours, they also managed to notice two lost insurgents who were asking for shelter. They were hiding in the garden for a few days. The girls helped them by handing over food and water at very specific hours. They could not help them, however, when the Germans caught them during escape and wounded one of them. The boy was dying all night moaning – this night none of the girls slept and they managed to maintain their psychic balance only thanks to a medicine the professor gave them. Also the need to maintain appropriate relations with the German guards proved to be a torture. When they asked that two of them served the soldiers by preparing meals, girls were in despair. Finally, for this unrewarding task *two ladies older than us by 5-10 years volunteered because they fared very badly on the modest food portions we had. They would come back late at night escorted by the soldiers and tell us, hungry, about the cutlets they had eaten. On the first day they even brought candies and gave them to us but I did not notice any of us eating them.*

When the Allies appeared over the city the Germans disappeared. A patrol of insurgents came to the hiding nurses, the insurgents hiding in the attic were taken out and the girls told to get ready to leave. However this did not happen: the guide who was to lead them did not come. Soon things incomprehensible for the girls started to happen: suddenly strange soldiers appeared in the area, causing panic among the Germans who soon hid in the basements.

Girls, just like the Germans, thought these were Russians. They noticed, however, that when leaving neighbouring houses they looked scruffy, their uniforms pulled with difficulty over the different things hidden underneath. *We concluded in surprise that these were probably robbers but we could not understand it at all.* When they came to the villa, the Germans jumped out of the basement and scared them away. These unknown soldiers as it turned out were from the Vlasov army, that is Ukrainian soldiers in German service. *We did not know then about the*



The Columbuses, dir Janusz Morgenstern (1970)

Photo courtesy of Filmoteka Narodowa

pogroms and rapes that took place in the houses the Ukrainians entered, we did not know – what an irony of fate – that probably the Germans saved our lives. The residents were told to abandon the house. Then the hell started, emotions suppressed until then exploded: All the girls disappeared from the room and screams came – as it appeared – from the kitchen. I went there and immediately left. The scene I saw made me feel nauseous. In one corner of the kitchen sat speechless cooks while on the table there were two big pots of lard which the girls ate by handfuls. It is true that our food rations for 23 days have been very modest and all of us were very hungry and that the professor's family ate separate meals but could we blame them for this? When they satisfied their hunger going through the wardrobes started, Bogna's dresses were taken out and distributed. I sat alone in the corner of the room and I felt terribly sorry. For a moment Bogna with her mother came to the room and immediately left. After some time professor's wife came to me and gave me Bogna's sweater, skate shoes and Leszek's linen shirt asking me to accept this gift. I started crying. Later on these things served me for 2-3 years.

Gajewska's story is not a typical insurrectionary scenario. It sheds special light, however, on the situation of women in those times. If the Germans met these girls

“in action” probably they would have no mercy for them. However not knowing about their status they decided, – to the despair of the interested party – to take care of them and offer them specifically understood kindness. What is more, in a certain sense they saved their lives protecting them from the Vlasow army. Emotionally the girls had a very difficult task. Being determined fighters they could not rebel openly. This was accompanied by frustration related to being closed in the house and the futility of waiting. The final exit of the girls has no traits of liberation – frustration changed into fear: of rape, robbery and wandering.

The isolation of the girls, the secret kept from the Germans, the sense of hopelessness related to the inability to fight, the limitation of the contact with the outside world to the peepholes cut out in the curtains – creates a situation of a great dramatic potential. Gajewska saturates her story with details and what is most important her story is very matter-of-fact. It is as faithful as possible account of events and not a story burdened with interpretation. And still this no-nonsense account in the end changes into a metaphor not through the decision of the teller but through its own power or the power of the concretum. The hole in a curtain as the sole eye onto the world in the situation described has a powerful symbolic meaning.

Liaison officers

In 2005 a book by Darek Foks and Zbigniew Libera *Co robi łączniczka (What the Female Liaison Officer is Doing)* ¹⁹ was published. Short stories included in this book always start in the same way: with a comparison of what the boys do with what the liaison officer does. So: *When boys come back in the morning, the female liaison officer sniffs. When boys go to burn a house, the female liaison officer walks across the square. When boys have a hangover, the female liaison officer sets off to the west.* The texts are accompanied by montages on which faces of beautiful actresses and sex symbols (Anita Ekberg, Catherine Deneuve, Louise Brooks, Sophia Loren, Monica Vitti) are placed on the photos of the participants of the Uprising. Sometimes the photos of liaison officers are fit into the frames of magazines “West”, “Picturegoer”, “Cahiers du cinéma”. Sometimes these are blurred, disturbing photos, referring to the Warsaw August of 1944. As the commentary by Jerzy Jarniewicz on the cover suggests, the project by Foks and Libera is supposed to refer to the memory, and examine this incestuous duo of word and image. Jarniewicz writes: *Memory in which words and images are stored, this old warehouse on the outskirts of the city does not belong to us. Visions that appear to us are already ready-made. Words that we will use to describe our house and our street have been ready for a long time* ²⁰. In this context the prose of Foks combined with photos by Libera direct the recipient towards the questions of myth – in this specific situation the myth that the Uprising itself and its participants have become. Or rather its female participants: liaison officers. They become the forms which have set in a very specific shape. The artists’ project however does not refer to, what is quite obvious, to the memory of women. It rather recalls the boys’ memory of these women. Not the boys of that time but of today whose borrowed memory in fact operates with these set shapes. For that reason in the frame cut out from *Canal* with Stokrotka by the crates at the sewer exit we can see the face of Anita Ekberg and on another photomontage a naked body of a woman with unrecognis-

able face. Two myths intertwine giving the image of the contemporary form of memory. This is truly a new way of speaking about the Uprising – there is no glorification, no words about glory or actions. What is revealed is the desire of corporeality, eroticism, circling around guesses what the liaison officer is doing when the insurgent thinks about her. Just as Korab wondered what Stokrotka was doing. And again, like in Wajda's work, the sensuality that is key in the creation of the model form of the liaison officer is highlighted. The protagonists of the montage photos by Libera, the half-fighters and half-stars are in the first place sexual figures.

This is a certain artistic choice. We can only point to its emblematic nature, to this repetition of the code established by Wajda's film, a way of thinking about the girls from the Uprising. So also today they are figures of sensuality, moved away from their function and everyday, often degrading work. Of course we can assume that such a radical emphasis on the sexuality of the girls from the Uprising denudes the absurdity of the myth. And still in the work of Foks and Libera it is difficult to find deconstruction, nor is this absurdity pointed out. In this case, liaison officers shown as sex symbols remain these sex symbols also today. We are dealing with fascination and not demythologisation. And so to maintain the balance it is worth looking at how those liaison officers considered each other, how their memory places itself, often creating a new heroic myth.

The book by Elżbieta Ostrowska is an incredibly valuable source about women from the liaison service. Ostrowska, alias Ela, commanded the Regional Message Centre "S," located in the basement of a tenement house at Al. Jerozolimskie 17. It was there that the famous or rather infamous "route of death" connected both parts of the City Centre. Ostrowska remained in the centre of the Uprising – in the geographical but also in combat meaning of the word. Through her unit went the most important reports and orders, it was her who sent liaison officers to the furthest areas of the capital city, who worried every time when one of the girls did not come back from the route, who worked out paths through the sewers, who was in touch with hundreds of civilians who got across under the barricade through Aleje. Ostrowska's account is on one hand detailed and on the other shows a broad panorama of the insurrectionary experience. She is cold and matter-of-fact but also subjective. We read memories of a commander and soldier who is also a young woman letting herself experience dramas taking place around her but also able to remain tough.

In this account it is characteristic that the author never tries to use the "status" of a woman even though she is aware of the difference. *We did not want it and we did not like it when the superiors treated us more as girls than as soldiers*²¹. It does not mean that she tries to assume a military, "male" tone. From her perspective women's service is something autonomous and relations between the liaison officers have crucial meaning. This sense of sisterhood, responsibility for each other constitutes the core of their insurrectionary work. When a liaison officer particularly close to her does not come back from the route for a disturbingly long time, Ela sets off to find her. She questions the civilians about girls they buried in the neighbourhood. Every fresh grave could be the grave of the one she was looking for. In one lies a nurse, in another a liaison officer, a blond with a bottle affixed to her hand containing sealed military ID and a letter to her mother. *The girl I was looking for was not a blonde. I go again to the cross with yesterday's date. I did not know the surname of patrol officer Jadwiga just as she did not know mine. I do not even*

know if “Jadwiga” is her first name or an alias. Am I standing at her grave? The description is a bit similar and this was the route she must have taken? (...) Among scattered rubbish, broken glass and burned papers, in a square ploughed away by a missile, among similar graves there is a small hill of ground covered in dust and rubble. “Liaison officer NN”²². This unknown liaison officer symbolises everyone from Ostrowska’s group. Even if the scenarios of lives of liaison officers remembered by Ostrowska differ, each of these stories, being an account of authentic events, grows into a symbol. Also this one in which a girl with a blond plait hiding in an entrance to a building in order to run across Aleje, does not notice the “tiger” and dies on her way and the only trace left of her is hanging from the window frame, *stuck there by the blast her plait – bright in bloody shreds*²³. And the story of Wanda who asks Ela not to protect her just because she could be her mother. When running across a street Wanda falls down Ostrowska is convinced that the liaison officer was hit. *Suddenly she rises from the ground. Just as unexpectedly as she fell before. With a few leaps she goes across the part of the street separating her from an entrance door and disappears inside. (...) At night she came back to “Eska” with a bag full of orders*²⁴.

Ostrowska offers also a detailed and precise account of crossing the sewers²⁵. It took place when Mokotów yielded – a place colonel Karol had to reach matter what. Seeing the exhaustion of the sewer guides Ostrowska decided to lead the unit of the insurgents herself. She was accompanied by Marysia who also knew her way around the sewers. The description of this crossing even in a text so rich with suggestive details still surprises with its vividness. Every detail noticed and every sound was recorded by the author. As well as every thought that accompanied her on the way: when the patrol passes the escapees from Mokotów, when the route becomes especially dangerous, when they hear inhuman howling, when open manholes are watched by the Germans, when in the darkness they step on dead bodies whose faces they sometimes recognise. The real drama starts when soldiers, the unaware of the danger, fall into a trap: they go out through a manhole watched by the Germans. Grenades fall into the sewer, everybody panics and there is chaos. The narrative immediately adjusts to the terror of the situation. It becomes broken, hysterical, but still clear and self-aware. Ostrowska tries to reason rationally but more and more often clarity of mind is disturbed by phantoms, pieces of detached, insane thoughts: *Where am I?... – shivering body brings me around from a daze – this is a sewer, rainfall drainage in Mokotów! You cannot stand up, you cannot sit. Who will sit – will not stand up any more. Go, go... why is the right leg so stiff and numb? Am I wounded? My head is confused. There is buzzing in my head like my skull is about to explode. Cherry blossom, trees covered with white flowers. So many petals! They fall on my face, fall down as rain...*²⁶ Suddenly a madman comes out from the darkness: *somebody’s huge, strong hands stuck in my body as steel claws and movements were paralysed by a hollow murmur: – Stop! Stop or I’ll strangle you! (...) Who are you? Who?!*²⁷ The madman appears to be one of the soldiers from the unit. He is paralysed by fear, in despair he grabs the liaison officer afraid that she will run away leaving him behind. The route gets longer, the wanderers stumble often and the only thought in their heads is “do not fall.” Finally unexpected rescue appears – one of the liaison officers learned that the guide and a soldier were left down there. When the help comes to the lost, *the distance or*

*open manholes are not scary anymore. You do not have to watch, decide, predict. There is light and there are they! They watch, lead, support when numbness comes with only sole flashes of consciences from time to time*²⁸.

Ostrowska never tries to maintain the heroic ethos of the crossing. She is literary and even “civilian” in the way of telling her story, she is not afraid to show fear and weakness. And again corporeality plays a great role but it is not sexualised at all. We will not find here the emphasis on “femininity” – this category has vanished replaced by “a human being.” Going beyond the division of sexes and simultaneous keeping of a-heroic, honest and “civilian” tone constitutes the power of Ostrowska’s account. It also reflects the attitude of many other liaison officers. This way the ethos of liaison officers is created by itself, ethos closely related to the concreteness of reality not referring to the myth detached from it.

Women “without uniform”

*There were mothers who fought. There were no husbands. In general there were no young men. A lot of women apart from children had also old mothers or grandmothers to take care of. But if they had somebody to leave the children with there were women who did so and fought. I think that they were fighting for these children*²⁹. We can assume that if they had nobody to leave the children with, the children had to go through the hecatomb that the civilians in the capital were sentenced to.

Accounts of the civilians from Warsaw 1944 are usually on the margins of the insurrectionary stories³⁰. Since they do not feed the heroic myth (especially that many of them show how the mood of the increasingly tormented residents of the city changed) and they do not document military actions. However they are not only an invaluable historical document but a unique testimony of the death of a city and the suffering of its inhabitants.

Against this background especially interesting seems the initiative of Edward Serwański to document crimes committed on the civilians from the capital – the accounts were recorded on the spot during the Uprising or directly after its suppression. These are memories but also testimonies dealing with very recent events and experiences. Persons telling the stories had no time to dress their experiences in a coherent narrative whole, to fit them in this or other discourse about the Uprising. In the publication *Życie w powstańczej Warszawie* which includes a selection of these testimonies we can find various accounts, often disturbing by their “inappropriateness.” The gathering of these materials was aimed at collecting evidence of crimes committed by the Germans on the residents of Warsaw so the testimonies usually refer to the most drastic experiences.

Many of these stories were told by women – young, old, mothers, wives, daughters, widows, housewives, students, clerks, teachers and nuns (as well as nurses and liaison officers). Their stories allow us to see the complete helplessness and defencelessness in the face of chaos of the fight. The civilians were not only left to the mercy of the enemy but to a great extent their fate depended also on the actions of the insurgents. The dilemma between the will to help the fighting and desperate attempts to save one’s own existence emerges from the majority of accounts. These testimonies also enable us to look at the Uprising from the perspective close to the one adopted by Białoszewski in his *Memoir*. Among testimonies published in *Życie*



The Stone Sky, dir. Ewa Petelska, Czesław Petelski (1959)

Photo courtesy of Filmoteka Narodowa

w powstańczej Warszawie we can find two especially emblematic: of Zofia Gosławska (other details unknown) who describes how together with other women she was driven as a live shield against the insurgents. The second is by Ms Tulewicz (first name unknown), a bank employee who on the day of the outbreak of the Uprising left a very sick daughter at home.

The first account recalls a critical and tragic situation: its author speaks about how she was led to death which according to the Germans' cruel plan was to be administered by "her" own insurgents. More or less a few hundred women were taken from their houses and gathered in front of the Gestapo's headquarters. In front of the tanks a group of women was placed and they were told to go towards the positions of the insurgents, they were driven towards Piusa Street, on the left occupied by the Germans on the right by the Poles. *Upon entering Piusa Street the German soldiers, before hiding in the tanks, told us to wave white handkerchiefs and call: "Don't shoot!" Women took advantage of this last recourse before inevitable death and towards the barricade on the crossing of Piusa, Mokotowska and Krucza went not so much a call but a scream intertwined with lament, cry and moan: "Don't shoot! Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" In our group there were only four women who did not scream. We were trying to control the situation by shouting:*

*“Don’t wave! Don’t cry! Don’t shout!” But our voice disappeared in the scream of women led to their death motivated by animal desire to save themselves no matter what – they did not scream but bawled as hell: “Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!” I felt then such a great contempt for my companions in misery that even the fear of death subsided. We approached the houses on the right side of Piusa Street occupied by our soldiers. I saw their faces with eyes wide open in dramatic tension looking at us; I read rage and despair in their eyes but at the same time I saw grenades and bottles with gas ready in their hands*³¹. It is hard to find a more disturbing description of a situation without exit, picture of the gap between an attempt to help the insurgents and desire to save life. This is a situation-lens in which focuses not only the specificity of the civilians’ position but of women themselves reduced to the role of a bargaining card in the conflict.

Another face of the fate of civilians is shown in the account of the clerk from Bank Emisyjny (The Issuing Bank). The Uprising started when she was at work from which she could not go back to her daughter left at home. For the first days of the Uprising the woman remained at the bank where *our Germans incessantly hanged on the telephones and sent various SOS messages in different directions. They were very afraid and wanted to be taken from there as fast as possible*³². After their evacuation the building was taken by the insurgents. During the wandering after the escape from the bank Tulewicz lost one eye and was severely injured. Until the end of August she stayed at a nursing point – *organised in a flat of a factory owner on his own initiative and at his own expense*³³. But it was not the pain and loss of an eye that prevented her from sleeping, it was the fear for her abandoned daughter: *What happened to her, how worried about me must she be, was she evacuated? She cannot get up herself, she is so afraid of the bombing. And so on. I had to think about that. I thought I would go mad*³⁴. Fear for their children, hunger and thirst, suffering, fever, continuous sense of danger were permanent elements of the insurrectionary existence of the civilians – both these in hospitals and these in shelters. But in the account of this simple bank clerk appears one more element which does not fit the canonical way of speaking about the Uprising and which undermines the heroic myth of its participants. Tulewicz says: *Floor after floor above us burnt – not completely but in parts – so we were moved to a shelter. But apart from that the situation in the apartments was rather gay. Various groups of the insurgents went through the house, followed by women. People said they were nurses but the sick complained about them a lot. I do not know what to think of it, but it made a strange impression on me: among the explosions of bombs, moaning of the sick, panting of the dying, these loud sounds of a piano coming from the upper floors, choir singing and maybe even dancing. I was not there, I do not know, I can say nothing more. I saw only that there was a lot of wine. The nurses drank it secretly by bottles*³⁵. A moment later she adds: *These ladies [residents of the house that helped her] spent most of the time in our shelter because their flats were partially or completely destroyed and every time they went upstairs they returned quickly downstairs. Not due to the fire but for another reason. Soldiers broke into the wardrobes, plundered the flats, and in bedrooms the nurses were to be found in intimate situations ! What could these ladies say? This was the mood at the time!*³⁶ Even if this accusatory account is only a symptom (or a fruit) of the negative attitude towards the insurgents, it meaningfully reveals the distance between the part

of the civilians and the fighters. This isolation and strangeness is also a part, even though unwillingly accepted, of the history of the Warsaw Uprising. Their story suggests that the insurrectionary reality was not a heroic monolith, that it had different faces. It is also valuable as much as it touches the taboo of the morals of the young at the time. The taboo maintained – as it seems – precisely by women and then girls who tried to keep the impeccability of the image of the fighting in August and September 1944 in Warsaw.

The question of such concealments brings us closer to the present. Today more and more often we come back to the reality of the Uprising precisely in the context of what so far has not been said. It takes place on various planes. On the one hand the need to speak about what was a taboo until today is recalled. On the other hand the voice is given to those who until today were sentenced to silence. An example of such a need is for sure the success of *Kieszonkowy atlas kobiet* by Sylwia Chutnik³⁷, awarded in 2008 with “Paszport Polityki”³⁸. In one of the four short stories in the book Chutnik tells the story of Ms Maria, a Jew, Kanalarka (woman who carried messages through the sewers) from the ghetto of 1943 and liaison officer of 1944. However, an equally important experience to the combat one is the specific female experience. The story about the fight is obscured by the story of a woman threatened by rape and humiliation. We find precisely this aspect of her fate to be powerful – because it was too shameful to talk about it, to not-heroic to recall it. Chutnik pays tribute to all women who had to go through such a hell. Using the figure of Ms Maria she builds a monument described in a strongly feminist discourse: *General, I report that as of today I adopt the pseudonym “Jewish Mother of God” matron of all female fighters of the ghetto and military uprisings; women shooters, bombers, murderers, rebels, sabotaging terrorist, madwomen with guns; women-revolutions who at night curl their hair to look well in the morning on the barricade; who tore their last tights so with a copying pencil they draw seams on their naked calves; girls in light summer, flowery blouses with huge bags over their shoulders. I spread protective wings over all the women who were caught by the enemy. I put my hands on their foreheads and whisper spells to their ears. I carefully wash off the semen from their tights, sew torn pants, and take care of scratches and scabs. I pray to myself that they may forget what happened to them. That they may wash off faces of their torturers, their words, shouts, panting and moaning. So they can become fighters for their existence again. I, the Jewish Mother of God, extend my hand to them and together we walk onto the very top of the barricade*³⁹. The Jewishness is emphasised exactly in the gesture of restoring and naming what in the official, heroic discourse is concealed; the shameful status of the Jewishness to a certain extent equals the shameful status of femininity.

Until recently this way of looking at and talking about the fate of women in the Uprising was practically absent (maybe even impossible). After the book that caused such a strong resonance, the aforementioned project of *Feminoteka* took place. In interviews with female participants of the Uprising, both those fighting and civilians, they managed to extract very intimate confessions often regarding corporeality and fear of violence towards woman’s body. Kazimiera Jarmułowicz writes about the everyday life in a shelter: *hygiene was difficult. When you had to go to the toilet, you had to go out, find a moment they were not shooting and run to the shed which stood in the yard. Women tore some pieces of cloth and later*

*buried them*⁴⁰. Barbara Tyc-Mazurkiewicz, alias Basia recalls: *but when the Uprising started I had no period. I do not know if this was due to stress but I had no problems on this account. It was a certain nervous shift, a kind of crisis. In any case, when I came back, my mother observed me and one day finally asked: "Basia, are you pregnant?" And I replied: "No, mum. Absolutely not"*⁴¹. None of the women who were interviewed mentions the fear of rape or sexual relations. Only Basia explains: *we slept together and were not aware of this sexuality, difference of sexes. We were colleagues, friends. I do not know how it was elsewhere*⁴². Maybe this aspect for girls of that time remains a taboo, maybe it destroys their own idealised view of the insurrectionary reality⁴³. What is interesting in Wajda's *Canal* is that precisely the erotic tension constitutes an important aspect of relations between the characters.

It does not appear that Wajda was motivated solely by the will to sexualise female figures. We can notice here rather an attempt to bring the Uprising down to earth and physical love is an important element of it (this way it was also described by Białoszewski). And even today the female participants of the Uprising are silent about this matter; in none of the accounts – just as in the recalled memories of the scouts, nurses and liaison officers – will we find a mention of sexual relations. Maybe it can be explained by the young age of the girls who at the time were around 16-18 and the fact that today only the youngest remain. It seems however, that also the older women who are still among us carefully guard the image of purity.

I do not think there is a need to make such a film

In 2006 in "Kino" an account of the discussion about the competition for a script of a film on the Warsaw Uprising was published. Participants of the discussion included: Andrzej Wajda, Norman Davies, Maciej Karpiński, Tadeusz Sobolewski and Dariusz Gawin⁴⁴. Andrzej Wajda said at the time: *My impression is that the idea for this competition does not come deep from the heart but from some speculation, opportunism. But the answer as to the popularity of such a film I see here, in this room, where there are almost no young people. Spectators are not interested in this topic. I do not think there is a need for such a film. Also because the society is still divided in the assessment of this event: some say that it was a great event, the others – that it was a deep, unnecessary wound inflicted upon the society*⁴⁵. Wajda's stance may seem surprising in the first place because in recent years we observe growing interest precisely among the young in the topic of the Uprising. It is confirmed not only by Chutnik's book but also by comic books published by the Warsaw Uprising Museum, numerous Internet forums whose users compete in their knowledge about the Uprising, publication by Foks and Libera as well as the most recent film project *Hardkor 44* by Tomasz Bagiński. Of course we can and have to discuss the way in which the topic of the Uprising is treated today, how it is inscribed in the area of pop culture and what the consequences are. However it is impossible not to notice that the young want to undertake such discussions and include their own thoughts in the Uprising-related discourse. And this proves the need to look at the Uprising from a new perspective, define one's own contact and relations with that reality and not necessarily with the myth that grew around it. Wajda's argument that the need to make new films

about the Uprising is made void by the fact that the society remains divided seems even more surprising – exactly this division in the assessments constitutes an important reason for making such films. I doubt whether the residents of Warsaw or Poles in general will manage to formulate a common stance towards this historical moment. It is impossible to create a film that would in an objective, comprehensive and satisfying to all way treat the topic of the Uprising. However the basic question is rather whether possible film projects should offer a clear, strong assessment or whether more important today are the attempts to describe and not historically summarise that reality. In the afore mentioned discussion Wajda also said: *There is so much talk about patriotism today... This film cannot answer the question about the sense of the Uprising. With Munk, we did films about the defeat in order to draw conclusions from it*⁴⁶. This question of sense of the Uprising, however, is still within the area of myth-creation while opposite to it “concretum” remains neglected. Maybe the time is right to return to the accounts, events and evidence. The starting point doesn't have to be a thesis or an attempt to assess the Uprising, but the fragmentary, personal and always concrete “micro-stories” of those who spoke about their experiences. Voices of women are here especially valuable because they introduce us to the neglected area in the insurrectionary reality, so far concealed. They allow us to learn about the special type of relations that bonded women, this “sisterhood” which so clearly supplements the “brotherhood.” Entering this new area widens the perspective and in disturbs the monolithic discourse on the Uprising. The veil covering women's experience may finally be lifted and real nurses, liaison officers and civilians may find their place in the frame. The scenarios wait practically ready.

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¹ *Powstanie w bluzce w kwiatki (Uprising in a Floral Blouse)*, a film made by Feminoteka Foundation within the project *Powstanie w bluzce w kwiatki. Życie codzienne kobiet w czasie powstania warszawskiego* (coordination Olga Borkowska). Film and interviews with female participants of the Uprising had been placed on the website of the virtual Women's History Museum: <http://www.feminoteka.pl/muzeum/> (accessed: 23.10.2009).

² The title refers to the “W-Hour” – the hour (17.00) set as the moment of the start of Uprising.

³ M. Białoszewski, *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*, trans. M. Levine, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 1991.

⁴ Auto commentary to the book placed on the cover of the first edition of *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* by Miron Białoszewski. Quote after: M. Janion, *Wojna i forma*, in: idem, *Placz generala. Eseje o wojnie*, Sic!, Warszawa 2007, p. 82.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 25-26.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

⁷ M. Komar, *Opisanie i wyjaśnienie części powodów, dla których w literaturze polskiej – mam tu na myśli powieść, dramat i scenariusz filmowy – nie powstało do tej pory i pewnie w najbliższych latach nie powstanie wielkie dzieło o czasach wojny i okupacji*, “Dialog” 1973, no. 4, p. 150. Quote after: M. Janion, op. cit., p. 68.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 88.

¹⁰ *Szacunek dla każdego drobiazgu*. Interview: Z Mironem Białoszewskim rozmawia Zbigniew Taranienko, “Argumenty” 1971, no. 36.

¹¹ M. Janion, op. cit., p. 83.

¹² K. Wyka, *Nikifor warszawskiego powstania*, “Życie Literackie” 1970, no. 22 (957).

¹³ These memories, written down in the 80s were gathered in a form of a printed brochure by the former pupils of this school. However this was a print for “private” use, for the pupils them-

- selves, so I do not consider the brochure a publication. A copy of these memories was deposited at the Warsaw Uprising Museum.
- ¹⁴ *Pełnić służbę... Z pamiętników i wspomnień harcerek Warszawy 1939-1945*, ed. A. Zawadzka, Z. Zawadzka, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1983.
- ¹⁵ E. Ostrowska, *W Alejach spacerują "Tygrysy". Sierpień – wrzesień 1944*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1973. "Tigers" in the title refers to the German tanks and "Aleje" to the Aleje Jeruzolimskie, big avenue dividing Warsaw into north part and south part. This avenue was very important during the Uprising as it divided the city, but also Polish troops – the street itself was controlled by the Nazis and it was very difficult – for civilians as well as for liaison officers – to force one's way through it.
- ¹⁶ *Życie w powstańczej Warszawie. Sierpień – wrzesień 1944. Relacje – dokumenty*, introduction and editing E. Serwański, Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, Warszawa 1965.
- ¹⁷ The detailed description of organisation and the character of documenting actions can be found in the introduction to the book published by Serwański: See *Życie w powstańczej Warszawie...* op. cit., p. 7-49.
- ¹⁸ From the interview with Barbara Strynkiewicz-Zurowska, alias Romka, a liaison officer during the Uprising conducted by Sylwia Chutnik and Anna Grzelewska within the project *Powstanie w bluzce w kwiatki*. The text of the interview available at: http://www.feminoteka.pl/muzeum/readarticle.php?article_id=44 (Accessed on: 23.10.2009).
- ¹⁹ D. Foks, Z. Libera, *Co robi łączniczka*, Instytucja Kultury Ars Cameralis Silesiae Superioris, Katowice 2005.
- ²⁰ J. Jarniewicz, text on the cover of the book by D. Foks, Z. Libera, op. cit.
- ²¹ E. Ostrowska, op. cit., p. 62.
- ²² Ibidem, p. 240.
- ²³ Ibidem, p. 80.
- ²⁴ Ibidem, p. 87.
- ²⁵ Ibidem, p. 268-290.
- ²⁶ Ibidem, p. 284.
- ²⁷ Ibidem, p. 287.
- ²⁸ Ibidem, p. 289.
- ²⁹ From the interview with Kazimiera Jarmułowicz conducted by Grażyna Latos within the project *Powstanie w bluzce w kwiatki. Życie codzienne kobiet w czasie powstania warszawskiego*. The text of the interview available at: http://www.feminoteka.pl/muzeum/readarticle.php?article_id=46 (Accessed on: 23.10.2009).
- ³⁰ It can also be clearly seen during the celebrations of subsequent anniversaries of the Warsaw Uprising. While main celebrations sanctify the memory of soldiers and scouts fighting during the uprising and their graves are covered in candles and flowers, on the collective graves of civilians at the Powązki military cemetery there are only a few tokens of memory. Taking into account the fact that losses among the civilians were a few times higher than losses among the fighting, marginalisation of the question of the hecatomb of the Warsaw civil residents seems meaningful.
- ³¹ *Życie w powstańczej Warszawie*, op. cit., p. 174-175.
- ³² Ibidem, p. 134.
- ³³ Ibidem, p. 135.
- ³⁴ Ibidem, p. 136.
- ³⁵ Ibidem.
- ³⁶ Ibidem.
- ³⁷ S. Chutnik, *Kieszonkowy atlas kobiet*, korporacja Ha!art, Kraków 2008.
- ³⁸ "Paszport Polityki" is an annual award presented by the Polish weekly "Polityka" in seven categories: literature, theatre, film, classical music, visual arts, scene and creator of culture.
- ³⁹ Ibidem, p. 100-101.
- ⁴⁰ From the interview with Kazimiera Jarmułowicz, op. cit.
- ⁴¹ From the interview with Barbara Tyc-Mazurkiewicz conducted by Sylwia Chutnik and Anna Grzelewska within the project *Powstanie w bluzce w kwiatki. Życie codzienne kobiet w czasie powstania warszawskiego*. Text of the interview available at: http://www.feminoteka.pl/muzeum/readarticle.php?article_id=40 (accessed: 23.10.2009).
- ⁴² Ibidem.
- ⁴³ It is significant that during presentation of *Powstanie w bluzce w kwiatki* in Warsaw Delikatesy of Teatr Rozmaitości Warszawa invited protagonists of the film, when asked about sensual love during the Uprising, all were indignant and said that these matters were for them completely insignificant at the time, that they had more important things on their minds.
- ⁴⁴ M. Gil, *Warszawa, sierpień 1944. Temat na dziś: film o Powstaniu (dyskusja)*, "Kino" 1996, no. 9, p. 12-15.
- ⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 13.
- ⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 14.