Implications of the Holocaust for a Woman: Was Life After Auschwitz Possible for Sophie Zawistowska?

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Introduction

William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* is a fictional story narrated by Stingo, a young writer-to-be at that moment. After settling into a rooming house in Brooklyn in the summer of 1947, Stingo meets Sophie, a beautiful woman in her late twenties. The occasion of their first encounter is emotionally challenging for Stingo – he is immediately attracted to Sophie, he witnesses a horrible fight between her and her lover Nathan Landau, and he also learns that Sophie is a Holocaust survivor: "I saw for the first time the number tattooed on the suntanned, lightly freckled skin of her forearm – a purple number of at least five digits, too small to read in this light but graven, I could tell, with exactitude

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and craft."[1] The three (Stingo, Sophie, and Nathan) begin spending time together. The story reveals Nathan Landau, a wealthy New Yorker with a Jewish background, as a promising scientist employed with Faiser, only for it to be discovered that Nathan is actually a doorman there, has been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, and abuses drugs. His occasionally extremely violent behaviors, first of all towards Sophie, can be now "explained." Their relationship during the story is one of obsession and impulsiveness, with ups and downs, and one that finally ends in their joint suicide.

On the one hand, *Sophie's Choice* is a novel about a devastating relationship of love between Sophie and Nathan, with Stingo playing his part too. On the other hand, as the story progresses, Sophie narrates her past to Stingo, to his and to the reader's increasing horror. Sophie's past forms critical and straightforward points of her current life in 1947, containing enablers and disablers of Sophie's post-Holocaust life. Her experience of Auschwitz is one of the most important factors in her capacity to live and integrate into society, not to mention a milestone for the integration and disintegration of her personality. In the text to follow, I explore the sources of Sophie's incapacity to live after Auschwitz, relying primarily on the novel (and speaking from the point of view of a reader who does not necessarily have in-depth knowledge of the Holocaust), which still has an abundance of historical data and facts about the Holocaust, Auschwitz, the Auschwitz camp commander, and Semitism. First, I present universal points about Auschwitz as one of the symbols of the Holocaust, in order to be able to frame and understand Sophie's positionalities during this period. Afterwards, I present

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1 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 50.

Sophie's narration of her "personal" Auschwitz experience and events that she witnessed, while also detailing developments that became imprinted within her, impacts that remained until her death. Finally, I pose a number of questions that the novel urges the reader to contemplate.

Auschwitz – Evil and its Servants

Why is the experience of Auschwitz so overwhelming for Sophie, Stingo, and the reader? Why was the experience of Auschwitz, by all means, the determination of the future for those who were there? Here, an important point should be made about the temporal dimensions: Stingo depicts in the 1970s events that occurred in 1947 (with references to the period in connection with World War II), whereas the novel was first published in 1979.[2] By the beginning of the 1980s, the Holocaust, and especially Auschwitz, was part of research, art, and public debate.[3] Still, from the end of World War II to the 1980s, many facts about Auschwitz and its horror were gradually entering public consciousness, both in the U.S. and elsewhere. There was not a lot of knowledge about the Holocaust in the aftermath of the war, even among the Jewish community

2 Zygmunt Mazur, "William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*: Can 'Faults' Become Assets?", *Studia Literaria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis* Vol. 10 No. 2, 2015, pp. 153–161.

3 Anke Hilbrenner, "Is There a Collective Memory of Perpetuators? Memory of the Holocaust in Germany from 1945 until Today," in Andrej Mitrović and Milica Mihailović (eds.), *The Kladovo Transport*, Jewish Historical Museum, Belgrade, 2006.

in the United States of America,[4] and the "puzzle" was yet to be discovered in its totality. Therefore, it is important to look at Sophie and other characters in the novel through their eyes – eyes that saw the events of 1947 – and understand these people in ways that they could have understood themselves and events in their lives.[5] Clearly, Stingo has the benefit of additional understanding, which is mediated by the historical context and undisputable knowledge from the 1970s – nothing of importance for Sophie and Nathan, who were dead long before.

For the purpose of this discussion, it is needless to mention objective, hard data, and numbers discovered in historical science in relation to Auschwitz. Among many others, Hannah Arendt wrote about the "permanent character of the gas chambers whose costly apparatus made the hunting for new 'material' for the fabrication of corpses almost a necessity."[6] Even today, with the extensive evidence available to us, it is extremely hard to explain it. Here, we have a sort of paradoxical situation. On the one hand, as mentioned in the novel and cited frequently, George Steiner claimed that *silence* is the answer, that it is best "not to add the trivia of literary, sociological debate to the unspeakable."[7] Even though we cannot but agree to this, we must assert that literature, and not only literature, cannot be silent on Auschwitz. Therefore, I will

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4 Efraim Zurof, *Operacija poslednja prilika*, Zavod za udžbenike, Beograd, 2011.

5 Dalia Ofer, "Discussion," in Andrej Mitrović and Milica Mihailović (eds.), *The Kladovo Transport*, Jewish Historical Museum, Belgrade, 2006.

6 Hannah Arendt, "Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps," *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1950, p. 58.

7 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 205.

attempt to reconcile these two positionalities and point to the most important dimensions of Auschwitz, having in mind Sophie's perspective.

Auschwitz was not a place that could be explained by using conventional terms. If we were forced to use one term, it would be the term of evil as evil in itself, both in its universalism (in terms of the massive scale of it), as in its banality and details, and this is what is horrifying: "A horrifying lesson on the ableism of evil"; "evil progresses intentionally and unintentionally, with and without any sense, by itself and in society, according to a plan or circumstances, sober and drunk, with and without the guilty consciousness."[8] Auschwitz was an embodiment of evil: "it was real (objective) structure and organization of evil," made almost perfect there, "with its technology of dehumanization of people."[9] On top of its symbolic representation of evil, Auschwitz was everyday evil, evil to be lived by its internees. The structure and technology of evil in Auschwitz were not enough; Auschwitz needed people – perpetrators and their collaborators – to execute the evil. On the top of the bureaucracy of evil, there was Rudolf Höss, as well as male and female keepers and camp "staff."[10] "Real evil, the suffocating evil of Auschwitz — gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring — was perpetrated almost exclusively by civilians. Thus we find that the rolls of the SS at Auschwitz-Birkenau contained almost no professional soldiers but were instead composed of a cross-section of German society. They included waiters, bakers, carpenters, restaurant owners, physicians,

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8 Nada Banjanin Đuričić and Predrag Krstić (eds.), *Obični ljudi – dobrovoljni dželati: spor oko (nemačkog) antisemitizma*, Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, Akademska knjiga, Beograd, Novi Sad, 2019.

9 Ibid.

10 Olga Lengyel, for example, depicted "the beasts of Auschwitz," the "angel of death," the "grand selector," etc.

a bookkeeper, a post office clerk, a waitress, a bank clerk, a nurse, a locksmith, a fireman, a customs officer, a legal advisor, a manufacturer of musical instruments, a specialist in machine construction, a laboratory assistant, the owner of a trucking firm... the list goes on and on with these commonplace and familiar citizens' pursuits."[11] Of course, there were "ordinary" people around, indifferent to human misery within the Auschwitz walls, in denial that they could be victims too. To quote Simone Weil from the novel itself, "imaginary evil [...] is romantic and varied, while real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring."[12]

Among many other things, Auschwitz convincingly taught those who were there (and outsiders) about humiliating and making people feel worthless, deprived of everything that was personal to them and their life. Extremely hard living circumstances made internees become antagonized against each other: "Germans constantly sought to put us against each other, to make us competitive, spiteful and hateful"[13] [...] "Perhaps the greatest crime the 'supermen' committed against us was their campaign, often successful, to turn us into monstruous beasts ourselves."[14] At the same time, oppression in Auschwitz provoked different forms of resistance, whether that be in the form of a so-called "organization" (which included theft from Germans as a social solidarity), resistance movements, "spoken newspaper," etc. But, despite teaching internees that mankind is full of flaws, and despite leading to deep, existential insecurity and uprooting, it also gave agency to many of them.

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11 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 143.

12 Ibid, pp. 141–142.

13 Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz*, Academy Chicago Publishers, Chicago, Illinois, 1995, p. 28.

14 Ibid, p. 228.

Olga Lengyel, who was an inspiration for Styron's character Sophie, put it this way: "Yet I saw many internees cling to their human dignity to the very end. The Nazis succeeded in degrading them physically, but they could not debase them morally. Because of this few, I have not entirely lost my faith in mankind [...] It is that hope which keeps me alive."[15]

Getting to know "Sophie's" Auschwitz

Stingo describes Auschwitz as a "fetid sinkhole of her [Sophie's] past."[16] After her father and her husband (both university professors) were killed by Nazis, Sophie moved from Krakow to Warsaw with her mother and two young children, Jan and Eva. In order to feed her very sick mother, Sophie provided "some illegal meat, part of a ham" and was caught with it. She was imprisoned first by the Gestapo. On April 1, 1943, she arrived at the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp and "fell into the 'slow hands of the living damnation'."[17] She spent 20 months in the camp and after its liberation, she was initially accommodated in a center for displaced persons in Sweden, where she tried to commit suicide, even though she was in denial of this. Sophie says: "And this was true, Stingo, I had no more emotions. I was beyond feeling, like there was no more tears in me to pour on the earth."[18] Since she was expecting to go to the U.S., she

15 Ibid, p. 229.

16 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 204.

17 Ibid, p. 203.

18 Ibid, p. 82.

started learning English. Upon arrival in the United States of America, eighteen months after she left Auschwitz-Birkenau, she weighed just 38 kilograms: "She was a rag and a bone and a hank of hair."[19]

The contextualization of "Sophie's" Auschwitz is not possible without the presentation of the most basic identifiers of her persona. As mentioned, Sophie is a Polish-born Catholic, a daughter, a widow and a lover, a mother to two children, an emigrant to the U.S., and a Holocaust survivor. Not only does she have multiple and fluid identities, like any other person, as well as multiple intersections between these identities, but she also has some very complicated intersections, bringing a lot of tension. The defining trait of her identity, for our understanding of her inability to live after Auschwitz, is its female dimension. I will show in the text that follows that being a woman and making choices, particularly "choices" as a woman, devastated Sophie.

The process of getting to know Sophie's identities is very gradual, provoked by intended as well as unintended developments. Both her and Stingo's styles of storytelling are somewhat delayed and non-linear. Even though this does not have to be a rule,[20] it could be that one of the most plausible and realistic options is to reveal "the truth" only after the reader thinks everything is said. The most important things, those that are the most painful for Sophie, are learned by the reader only towards the very end of the novel. As one was able to see in the court process

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19 Ibid, p. 63.

20 Olga Lengyel, an antithetical character to Sophie, starts her narration of Auschwitz in "Five Chimneys" from the very first line by demonstrating her guilt to the reader: "*Mea culpa,* my fault, *mea maxima culpa*!". Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz*, Academy Chicago Publishers, Chicago, Illinois, 1995, p. 11.

against Adolf Eichmann, the victims were "putting it aside,"[21] because developments in Auschwitz were existentially devastating and highly traumatizing for them. The second-generation survivors state that they were getting to know about the Holocaust experiences of their parents slowly and gradually,[22] explaining it as a survival strategy for victims and the next generation; in order to go further with their lives, they wanted to forget the horror of the Holocaust and avoid burdening their children. Also, in order to reveal their story, people have to build a trusting relationship with another person, be it even the reader indirectly. People also have to be able to dig into themselves. Their "confessions," as is the case with Sophie confessing to Stingo, must have some kind of consistency; they have to give meaning to their activities, and in order to do that, they have to be able to process events, understand them, and so on. Another angle through which to understand the reasons why victims remained silent was the disbelief conveyed by outsiders. Outsiders knew that life was extremely hard for those in the concentration camps (especially Auschwitz), but they also thought of it as an exaggeration and that the survivors mixed up reality with illusions. Viktor Frankl, another Holocaust survivor and a psychiatrist, wrote a book *Man's Search for Meaning*.[23] The book's alternative title – *Why Have You Not Committed Suicide?* – was actually the most frequent question he was asked by "ordinary" people after the camp's liberation.

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21 Trial of Adolf Eichmann, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVOXYMU-W4qo, accessed 15-08-2024.

22 Based on information I obtained during interviews with second-generation Holocaust survivors from Yugoslavia, held in August 2023 in Šabac, Serbia.

23 Viktor Frankl, *Zašto se niste ubili? Traženje smisla življenja,* Žarko Albulj, Beograd, 1994.

Sophie's living experiences in Auschwitz – "choices," damages, guilt, and emptiness in the end

Sophie narrates to Stingo her guilt for being a survivor: "Why [...] I should feel so much guilt over all the things I done there. And over just being alive. This guilt is something I cannot get rid of and I think I never will [...] I know I will never get rid of it. Never. And because I never get rid of it, maybe that's the worst thing the Germans left me with."[24] Death was considered a definite outcome once a person arrived at Auschwitz: "'I remember his [Hauptsturmführer Fritzch, an SS functionary] exact words,' Sophie told me. 'He said, You have come to a concentration camp, not to a sanatorium, and there is only one way out — up the chimney. He said, Anyone who don't like this can try hanging himself on the wires. If there are Jews in this group, you have no right to live more than two weeks. Then he said, Any nuns here? Like the priests, you have one month. All the rest, three months'." [25] Death was a desirable outcome for many of the internees. Once again, in Sophie's words: "Most of them when they first come there, if they had only known, they would have prayed for the gas."[26]

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24 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 268.

25 Ibid, p. 222.

26 Ibid, p. 222.

There are two central sources of Sophie's "devastating guilt,"[27] two taboos, deeply intersected. As we can glean from the first two sentences quoted under this subtitle from the novel, they are both in connection with the fact of her survival, as well as the method of her survival.

Firstly, her deepest trauma is rooted in her arrival at the camp, the so-called "selection." On the night she arrived at Auschwitz, a camp doctor made her choose which of her two children would die immediately by gassing and which would continue to live, albeit in the camp: "'You may keep one of your children,' he repeated. 'The other one will have to go. Which one will you keep?' (...) 'You're a Polack, not a Yid. That gives you a privilege — a choice.' (...) 'I can't choose! I can't choose!' She began to scream. (...) 'Hurry now and choose. Choose, goddamnit, or I'll send them both over there. Quick!' She could not believe any of this."[28] Of her two children, Sophie chose to sacrifice her eight-year-old daughter, Eva, a decision that devastated her. The motive was her evaluation that the boy had a better chance of surviving in the camp, yet this was not helpful at all – either of the "choices" eliminated her moral obligations as a mother – "no matter what she does, she will violate a moral obligation that she recognizes that she has."[29]

Secondly, Sophie's acquaintance Wanda (who is actually a sister to Sophie's lover during the period of her living in Warsaw after her husband's death), an active member of the resistance movement in Warsaw and later also in Auschwitz, and an example of female bravery there, told Sophie: "'Listen! It all depends on what kind of relationship you strike

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27 Ibid, p. 206.

28 Ibid, p. 451.

29 Suzanne Lynn Dovi, "Sophie's Choice: Letting Chance Decide," *Philosophy and Literature* Vol. 30 No. 1, 2006, p. 176.

up with Höss. So much depends on that, Zosia darling, not only what happens to Jan and yourself but to all of us'. (...) Thus Sophie came to spend her ten days under the Commandant's roof."[30] This was like salvation to Sophie, as she narrated to Stingo: "'I must move quickly if I was to – yes, I will say it, *seduce* Höss, even if it makes me sick sometime when I think of it, hoping that somehow I could seduce him with my mind rather than my body'."[31] Sophie thinks that she can persuade him to put her son into the Lebensborn program; her son would be brought up in Germany by a foster family but alive. Since she was able to perform some secretarial duties (learned while helping her father previously), she became engaged with Höss.

To gain Höss' affection, Sophie deploys anti-Semitism. Namely, she presents to Höss an anti-Semitic paper that her father, a law professor, diligently and devotedly wrote in the form of a pamphlet in favor of the Nazi regime and tries to persuade Höss of her own anti-Semitic feelings. Apart from that, her stance on Jews was rather ambiguous, and "only" instrumental at best in her approach to Höss. Therefore, on top of her "choice" to resist or instead collaborate and cohabitate in the camp, another contradiction and guilt became present – one in connection with her position towards Jews. In the camp, where she can witness firsthand the bravery and resistance of some internees, her learned helplessness and lack of agency seemed so clear and discouraging to her.

And, finally, when Auschwitz is liberated, Sophie is left with nothing: without her whole family, including her children, whose death she considers her own fault, and without any self-respect, leading to self-hatred.

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30 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 366.

31 Ibid, p. 218.

The reader can see Stingo talking about Sophie as the victim and perpetrator at the same time. Still, this is "black and white." We cannot overlook that Sophie was forced to make her choice in abrupt "normality"; normal rules of life could not be applied to Auschwitz, which was all but normal.

Sophie's life after Auschwitz

The framework of Sophie's integration into society after Auschwitz features at least three milestones: experiences related to Auschwitz, being a non-Jewish person, and the reality of living in the U.S. in the aftermath of World War II, rooted in her lack of agency and oppression as a woman.

Firstly, her experiences in Auschwitz had a profound impact on Sophie's post-Holocaust identity and integration. She is damaged by her "choices" and losses, and this urges the reader to adopt a "trauma" lens when attempting to understand her. On the other hand, "she was determined to put behind her the madness of the past – or as much as a vulnerable and memory racked mind permitted – and so for her the huge city became the New World in spirit as well as fact [...] Her whole experience of America was New York – mostly Brooklyn – and eventually she came to love the city and to be terrified by it in almost equal measure [...] She was feeling her way. In every sense of the word having experienced *rebirth,* she possessed some of the lassitude and, as a matter of fact, a great deal of the helplessness of a newborn child."[32] Sophie was

32 Ibid, pp. 86–87.

happy to be able to be alone, as she did not have any privacy in either Auschwitz or Sweden. Music and books fulfilled her life again. She was regaining her health, she found a part-time job, and she found love.

Secondly, would the reader not expect that Sophie is Jewish? In fact, she is not, but her lover is a Jew. Their relationship is very violent. Once again, his character is quite the opposite of what the reader would expect to see: he is the one who is victimizing and hurting her.[33] Previously, I referenced Sophie's anti-Semitic expressions in Auschwitz. Here, I present these same expressions after the Auschwitz experience.[34] The

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33 Michael Lackey describes this plot writing: "In *Sophie's Choice* William Styron commits an unpardonable sin." Michael Lackey, "The Scandal of Jewish Rage in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*" *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol. 39 No. 4, 2016, p. 85. Similarly, Sylvie Mathe writes of Styron's problematic choice of making the main character Christian rather than Jewish, and "his blurring of fact and fiction, which results in a falsification of history." Sylvie Mathe, "The 'Grey Zone' in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice,*" *Etudes Anglaises* Vol. 57 No. 4, 2004, p. 453. On the other hand, narrating of "untypical characters" in *Sophie's Choice,* Zigmut Mazur describes the merit behind the universalism of Auschwitz: "I am not persuaded that Styron wants to 'reverse' [a proper] reading [...] The universalist vision of the Holocaust is precisely what may help prevent future genocide." Zygmunt Mazur, "William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*: Can 'Faults' Become Assets?", *Studia Literaria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis* Vol. 10 No. 2, 2015, pp. 153–161, p. 158.

34 Michael Lackey shows that the question of Sophie's Anti-Semitism was heavily debated among Styron's followers, to ultimately conclude that she was an Anti-Semite, supported by Styron's statement in an interview: "it would be inconceivable for someone like Sophie to be untainted by her father's and country's anti-Semitism." Michael Lackey, "The Scandal of Jewish Rage in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice,*" *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol. 39 No. 4, 2016, p. 90.

reader is presented with the following words said by Sophie: "Jews! God, how I hate them! Oh, the lies I have told you, Stingo. Everything I told you about Cracow was a lie. All my childhood, all my life I really hated Jews. They deserved it, this hate. I hate them, dirty Jewish cochons!"[35] Still, these feelings are presented in her deep emotional status of disintegration, intensified by her Jewish lover's violence. The reader views this as a cry of anguish, one aimed at Nathan as well as Jews in general. Nathan is a Jew, and she is suicidally in love with him. "She was so chaotically in love with Nathan,"[36] writes Stingo, that she sees him as her only salvation (both practically and metaphorically), her air and her cure. Still, nothing, however strong, could bring her relief from the effects of her 'choice' in Auschwitz.

So, "Sophie's" Auschwitz cannot be abandoned by her, and Nathan questions it continually, asking her how she survived Auschwitz, speculating on her immoral behavior there, calling her Irma Griese and similar, and deeply exploring her anti-Semitic attitudes.

Along with this individual dimension, there is a societal one in relation to two important challenges: first, the role of Slavic nations during the Holocaust; and second, the narration of the Holocaust as a uniquely Jewish trauma and the development of movements to support Jewish victims. The people of Poland, the nation to which Sophie belongs, were frequently seen as perpetuators and collaborators with the Nazi regime during the Holocaust.[37] Moreover, at the time of the events de-

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35 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 329.

36 Ibid, p. 139.

37 Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors – The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey,

scribed in the novel, the Holocaust was seen as specific Jewish trauma, with organized movements to support Jews, and Jews alone. There was also the Polish Jews Association of Former Jewish Concentration Camp Inmates & Partisans, which was committed to assisting newly arrived survivors from Europe (Katsetler Farband)[38] and served as an example of survivors' attempts to organize themselves in the United States. However, the reader does not learn about how Sophie engaged with other survivors, nor her interest in building a sense of connection with them. She simply kept her grief private and did not belong to any of the organizations. There is nothing political in her activities. In the displaced persons camp, survivors continued to suffer together, but in migration, they had to make conscious decisions and organize as a group. Sophie did not put any effort into belonging to a community of memory or forming a "group survivor" identity.

Thirdly, what was it like for a survivor to live in the U.S. in 1947? The world, including the U.S., has just started revealing the horrors of the Nazi regime. Styron writes: "Full revelation had been slow yet certain. The first news of the camp atrocities had been made public, of course, in the spring of 1945, just as the European war ended; it was now a year and half later, but the rain shower of poisonous detail, the agglomeration of

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2001; Adam Michnik and Agnieszka Marczyk (eds.), *Against Anti-Semitism – An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Polish Writings*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018; Nada Banjanin Đuričić and Predrag Krstić (eds.), *Obični ljudi – dobrovoljni dželati: spor oko (nemačkog) antisemitizma*, Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, Akademska knjiga, Beograd, Novi Sad, 2019.

38 David Slucki, "A Community of Suffering: Holocaust Survivor Networks in Postwar America," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* Vol. 22 No. 2, 2017, pp. 116–145.

facts, piling up at Nuremberg and at trials elsewhere like mountainous unmentionable dungheaps, began to tell more than the consciousness of many could bear, even more than those numbing early newsclips of bulldozed cordwood cadavers suggested. As she watched Nathan, Sophie felt she was regarding a person in the grip of a delayed realization, as in one of the later phases of shock. Until now he simply had not allowed himself to believe. But now he believed, all right."[39] One of the first Holocaust monuments in the U.S. was presented on October 19, 1947, in New York City.[40] Despite that, it is not that the public space was overwhelmed by the horrors of Nazi regime in 1947. For example, and as I already mentioned, there is a specific momentum in the novel, so strongly depicting ignorance of the majority of inhabitants in the U.S. about the Holocaust: one of the lodgers in the house, Morris Fink, re-telling an awful fight between Sophie and Nathan to a horrified Stingo, is confused with Nathan's question to Sophie about Auschwitz: "Asked her how come she *lived through Owswitch.* What did he mean by that?" and added at the end "What's Owswitch?"[41]. Obviously, he did not know about Auschwitz, not even the camp's name. The world, including the U.S., had just started developing the vocabulary of Auschwitz, to depict unprecedented terror from there. On the other hand, there was the U.S., a progressive nation of wealthy people with their American credos, living in a state of post-war optimism and confidently implementing their policies of integration.

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39 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, pp. 301–302.

40 Efraim Zurof, *Operacija poslednja prilika*, Zavod za udžbenike, Beograd, 2011.

41 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 201.

Finally, Sophie's lack of agency and systematic oppression as a woman are embedded into her whole life, including the majority of her "decisions" and "choices." She just cannot resist depending on and seeking guidance from her father, Höss, as well as from Nathan. She does everything to please them – it is simply a question of who she is trying to please. It appears to the reader that her tragic end cannot be avoided: "Sophie returns from the grave [...] Spiritually, Sophie died in the concentration camp, but she could not rest until she had unburdened her soul."[42]

Further thinking

Certainly, Auschwitz ended with the world as a whole remaining the same as before those harrowing events. The reader is left shaken and unsettled by Sophie's story and feels empathy and sympathy towards her. Her pain and grief are evident, and resonate strongly with the reader. Clearly, the novel is fictional, and Sophie did not exist, but everything described could have actually happened. Therefore, a series of questions are raised for the reader, who ponders how a "silent shock" turns into a scream, such as: What were the ways in which Sophie tried to live a "normal" life after Auschwitz? What are the reader's feelings and understanding upon finishing the novel? Does he/she feel existential insecurity for himself/herself? Are his/her concepts of justice/injustice, guilt/innocence, cooperation/resistance, morality/immorality,

42 William Sewell, "When Choice is an Illusion: Suppression of Women in William Styron's 'Holocaust' Novel," *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice* Vol. 9 No. 1, 2017, p. 107.

and “choices” redefined? What is the impact of conceptions of heroic resistance vs. “non-heroic memories” of survivors? What is his/her reaction to traumatizing historical events? How does the novel build up the Holocaust consciousness?

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