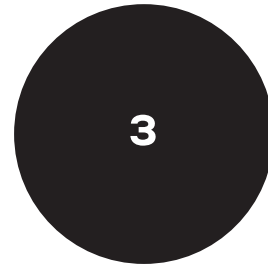




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Iwona Kurz

Greetings from Auschwitz

Translated by Magda Szcześniak

The day has turned pleasantly warm. The soft wind delicately prods the branches of the poplar trees as a honey-colored leaf floats gracefully on the gentle breeze. Double rows of barbed wire join concrete pillars honeycombed with white insulators. The space between the rows of barbed wire is empty, the earth raked clean. A teenage boy in tight pants is standing next to a sign that reads 'Halt!' His friend is taking a picture. The sign also has a black skull-and-crossbones. A third boy taps his forehead with his finger and remarks that it's stupid to take pictures in a place like this. Once again the branches of the poplars start swaying, and leaves float through the air, alighting softly on the ground.

[...] 'Grażynka, Grażynka, come to mommy. Here, have a piece of chocolate. Wipe your nose, and your face and hands.' 'I'm hungry, Mommy. I hope they're gonna serve dinner.' 'Ah, don't bet on it. This whole tour has been poorly arranged. Everyone is wandering around wherever they please.'¹

According to Grzegorz Niziołek, *An Excursion to the Museum* can be read as a palimpsest drawn over the concentration camp stories of Tadeusz Borowski.² The well-known image of people making their way from the unloading ramps to the gas chambers has been superimposed onto another; that of a commonplace tourist stroll through the camp grounds, which had by that time already been turned into a museum. Twenty years after the war, as Różewicz was writing this story, Oświęcim—not yet, and not yet for a long time, Auschwitz—had already been turned into a cliché.³

Paweł Szypulski's collection "Greetings from Auschwitz" starts with a group portrait taken under the "Arbeit macht frei" sign—still the most popular way of commemorating a visit to the Museum. The photograph was most probably made as early as the 1950s, which proves that the process of overwriting, constructing an image of the camp-as-museum, started soon after the war, from the moment the

site of the concentration camp—the site of the event—was acknowledged as a site of memory. Visitors inevitably become performers and part of the spectacle. This spectacle, based on repeated practices of looking and documenting, characterizes all tourist sites. Here, however, banal tourist activities constitute a repetition, in a different context, of past situations, an unintentional pastiche, or at least they can be interpreted this way. A photograph taken by the “Halt!” sign becomes a dark trophy, as well as an inappropriate encroachment upon the solemn character of the site.

Szypulski's collection concentrates on a single topic, yet in many ways it resembles a cabinet of curiosities. It is difficult to assess how common the practices it captures were, and equally hard to point to its actual object of representation. The collection was most probably provoked into being by an affective incitement—one of astonishment. The objects in it bring together the repetitive, sentimental, “cute” medium of the postcard and the legend of an exceptional site, a site marked by pain and symbolizing the fall of the soul of man. Szypulski obtained most of the postcards on Allegro (a Polish online auction and shopping website). From this limited and secondary circulation, it would of course be difficult to judge the actual circulation of postcards printed by the Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau from its opening up to today. However, the collection forces us to pose questions about forms of representation—the question of what should constitute an Auschwitz “souvenir”—and about practices of memory, and the motivation behind one's decision to buy and send such postcards. The author of the collection is most drawn to postcards that were used in accordance with their purpose—as carriers of positive feelings, as “messengers of emotions,” as literary critic Małgorzata Baranowska has described them.⁴ The more these Auschwitz postcards resemble regular postcards, the more uncanny they seem.

The idea behind starting a collection like this isn't necessarily original. The first postcard presented on Szypulski's [website](#) reads:

Finally a different card, I don't think there has been one like this before.
I think this is the last business trip this year. Kisses for both girls. Wilhelm.
Auschwitz 12.20.1968.

It seems that "Wilhelm" makes frequent business trips to Auschwitz, and each time he searches for a different postcard to send, a different picture. In fact, most of the postcards seem quite similar. This one perhaps slightly diverges from the usual because of the deep perspective and the visible residue of snow—not a very eye-catching view. However, like most postcards, it shows the buildings and apparatus of the concentration camp turned into museum spaces and objects—spaces and objects to look at—and captured within a necessarily aesthetic frame, one guaranteed both by the medium of the postcard and by the shooting technique. The photographers' (a couple of recurring names indicate that the photographs were taken by close collaborators of the Museum) aesthetic gesture gives the spaces a certain feeling of contemplation and reflection. Auschwitz is photographed from a distance, usually from below or from an angle. This recurring atypicality is supposed to emphasize the singular character of the site, to draw the viewers' attention to the fact that this is not an ordinary landscape. Of course, inevitably, this leads this site of memory to being transformed into a typical landscape, a landscape for reflection, an aesthetic object.

This is how the landscape is treated by users of the postcard medium—as a transparent and self-evident image filling the material space of the card. To users, it would seem, the reverse side is more important. On the versos we can read: "And finally I didn't run into Zosia" (November 1, 1946), "Warm greetings from Oświęcim to the »ungrateful« Hania – Stanisław" (postcard from 1958 with the printed inscription: "The Whole Nation Rebuilds Its Capital. The proceeds from the sales of this postcard will support the Public Fund for the Rebuilding of the Capital"); "Sending my warmest regards on the occasion of my visit to Oświęcim." We can find postcards written in Czech and postcards with name-day wishes. On the reverse of a photograph of the interior of a gas chamber in crematorium I, someone wrote: "Warm greetings from Oświęcim (sent by your neighbors)." A postcard sent in 1966 shows tourists exiting the gas chambers and contains a note: "I wouldn't wish anyone a visit to this place (as a tourist)." The rest, even if they refer to the specificity of the place from which they are sent, quickly fall into the simple conventions of "wishes" and "greetings."

The postcard was invented as a form of easy communication—a form pretending to

escape the “weight of representation.” As Baranowska wrote, “the postcard created a language of schematic emotions, which were simultaneously supposed to pass as unique.”⁵ The postcard is also located outside of history, as its goal is to catalogue basic practices (traveling), types and emotions (from greetings to love confessions). A postcard never demands any cognitive effort, and the gaze inscribed within it—even if it is a view from below, from an angle, from the top—doesn't carry with it any of the subversive potential of “looking awry.”

The last card presented was never sent, but one is still surprised by the very idea of printing this particular photograph as a postcard. It shows the burning of corpses outside the crematorium and is one of only four such photographs taken by the Sonderkommando in August 1944. In order to adapt the photograph for mass use as a postcard, the image was framed and retouched. On its verso, it contains all of the usual elements of a postcard—information about the publisher and circulation, space for the address and the stamp. The use of this historical photograph—carrying not only the “weight of representation,” but also the status of proof—as the postcard “picture” makes visible something that has been known for some time now. What strikes us in these postcards from Auschwitz is that the “smooth” medium of the postcard doesn't suit the “difficult” content of memories about the camp. These images, used on postcards, prove that we remain in the same order of banal modernity, the order which was the basis for the camps and mass extermination itself. The gesture of photographing oneself under the sign “Arbeit macht frei” (with the belly of the B turned upside down) is a striking gesture, one that only affirms one's inclusion in this same order.

Footnotes

1 Tadeusz Różewicz, *An Excursion to the Museum*, trans. Roslyn Hirsch, David H. Hirsch, <http://www.aapjstudies.org/manager/external/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Rozewicz.pdf>, accessed November 2, 2013. Translation slightly changed. Originally published in Poland in 1966.

2 Grzegorz Niziołek, *Polski teatr Zagłady* (Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego – Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2013), 286.

3 In the second half of the 1960's, it is clear to many that narratives about the war have become a cluster of readymade images. One could find proof of such awareness in the, unfortunately terribly moralistic, stories by Andrzej Brycht: *Trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau* (1966) and *A Dance Party in Hitler's Headquarters* (1966) and their film versions: *A Trip to the Unknown*, directed by Jerzy Ziarnika (1967) and *A Dance Party in Hitler's Headquarters*, directed by Jan Batory (1968), as well as ironic pseudo-documentaries by Marek Piwowski *The Flykiller* (1966) and *Fire! Fire! At Last Something Has Happened* (1967), and finally, in Jerzy Skolimowski's feature film *Identification Marks: None* (1964).

4 Małgorzata Baranowska, *Posłaniec uczuć. Prywatna historia pocztówki*, (Warsaw: Twój Styl, 2003).

5 Małgorzata Baranowska, „Pocztówka masowa i fotografia uczuć,” *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa* (3-4) 1992: 36.