

# RECONSTRUCTING MEMORIES OF THE PAST THROUGH POETRY AND NARRATIVE: ELIZABETH WEIN'S ROSE UNDER FIRE

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## Reconstructing History

*Rose Under Fire* features an American female pilot who works as a ferry pilot in Britain during the Second World War. In September 1944, she flies to France to deliver a plane. Breaking the rules, she intends to topple a flying bomb and joyrides too far into the continent. Consequently, she is captured by two German planes and imprisoned in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, which was located in northern Germany, about 90 km north of Berlin. It turns out to be an experience which will impact her literary talent and creative flair by providing her with an incentive to compose.

It should be pointed out that the author of the novel has a pilot licence herself. Thus, to a certain extent, she draws on her personal experience while portraying her characters. Wein's meticulous approach to historical facts should also be pointed out. The heroine is a member of the American WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots) and then the British ATA (Air Transport Auxiliary). Although Rose and her fellow prisoners are fictional, the situation of women pilots, the conditions in the camp and the existence of a group of rabbits – mainly Polish women who were experimented on – are all based on true events.

As far as historical facts are concerned, secondary sources studied by Wein prior to writing the novel are available on her personal website.<sup>1</sup> Readers are thus encouraged to compare past events with the

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<sup>1</sup> *Elizabethwein*, <https://www.elizabethwein.com/rose-under-fire> [01.12.2019].

book based on them. In this regard, historical novels offer a complexity of interrelationships and versions of history presented from different vantage points. De Groot states that the historical novel is, on the one hand, “an attempt at authenticity, at real(ist) representation, at memorialisation”, whereas on the other hand, “the otherness of the past is constantly foregrounded (...), the clear bias and subjectivity of the approach of the novelist create a state of flux for the history being presented”.<sup>2</sup> It should be borne in mind that the aim of historical fiction is not to replace historical narratives but rather to elaborate on selected aspects of the past utilising fictional characters and stories.

The most important theme based on true events is the existence of so-called rabbits. This term might be derived either from the German word Versuchskaninchen or its Polish equivalent królik doświadczalny. In both languages, the English guinea pig is replaced with a rabbit in relation to an experimental subject. With regard to the Ravensbrück concentration camp, it denotes prisoners on whom medical experiments were conducted. The British journalist and writer Sarah Helm states: “By 1942, Himmler had started to see medical experimentation as a key purpose for the concentration camps. Here was a chance to use human guinea pigs, and to achieve bold scientific innovation that the conservative medical profession outside the camps would never envision.”<sup>3</sup> The experiments involved wounding selected women, infecting them with bacteria, removing parts of their bones and muscles or even amputating their limbs so as to improvise the wounds inflicted on German soldiers at the eastern front and to be able to treat them more effectively. In early July 1942, prisoners saw new equipment being installed at the operating theatre at Ravensbrück. The youngest and fittest women from the Lublin transport were examined and selected for medical experiments.<sup>4</sup> At first, a group of six women were accommodated at the Revier, which was theoretically an infirmary. In reality, it was where experimental surgeries, which would be illegal under any normal circumstances, took place. Afterwards, other Poles from the Lublin group – over seventy women – underwent the same procedure.

Women who were infected with lethal doses of gas gangrene and tetanus were dying in agonising pain. In the autumn of 1942, the prac-

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<sup>2</sup> J. de Groot, *Consuming History. Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, New York 2009, p. 218–219.

<sup>3</sup> S. Helm, *If This Is a Woman. Inside Ravensbrück: Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women*, London 2015, p. 217.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 218.

tice of murdering by injection became more common. The prisoner nurse Gerda Quernheim seemed to be authorised to perform injections and, as witnesses testified, she did it at whim.<sup>5</sup> The possibility that she wanted to alleviate the women's suffering cannot be entirely excluded; however, it is more likely that it was a brutal exercise of power. Easy access to experimental subjects tempted another German doctor – Ludwig Stumpfegger – to conduct experiments himself, namely “he wanted to break bones and see if they would grow back together again”.<sup>6</sup> Then, another group of Polish prisoners were selected to become his experimental subjects. Additionally, women of other nationalities, such as Russian, Ukrainian, Czech or even German, were brought for “special experiments”<sup>7</sup>, which none of them survived. These atrocities would have remained unknown, if it had not been for a Polish radiologist forced to work at the Revier and the rabbits who survived, which proves the significance of testimony offered by fellow prisoners.

Astonishingly, those experiments appeared to make the Nazis feel more embarrassed than killing Jews in crematoriums, conducting brutal interrogations or shooting resistance fighters. Towards the end of the war, the Nazi doctors wanted the rabbits to be dead since they were evidence of their despicable crimes. However, Polish prisoners devised a plan for telling the world. They smuggled brief straps of paper in clothes sent to the bereaved families of the deceased and managed to pass information secretly by scribbling it with urine in the margins of letters sent to their relatives.<sup>8</sup> They hoped that the Polish underground would relay it to the UK, the USA, the International Red Cross and the Pope. Above all, they wanted to make the entire world aware of these war atrocities even if they did not survive. In fact, other prisoners went to great lengths, risking their own lives, to hide the rabbits so that their disfigured legs would serve as evidence of the Nazis' cruelty and inhumanity.

Historical implications should also be taken into consideration while analysing poems composed by Rose in the camp and recited to her inmates. It is alleged that the war resulted in a “severe crisis of verse”<sup>9</sup> and, as Theodor W. Adorno claimed: “After Auschwitz, it

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<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 235.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 233.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 237.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 250–252.

<sup>9</sup> S. Felman, *Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching*, [in:] *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. C. Caruth. London 1995, p. 31.

is no longer possible to write poems.”<sup>10</sup> Yet there are numerous instances of poetry being written during World War Two so as to alleviate distress and misery. As Linda M. Shires claims: “From 1939 to 1945 hundreds of men and women in military or government service wrote poetry.”<sup>11</sup> Poetry was also composed and recited in the most extreme inhumane conditions. As far as the Ravensbrück concentration camp is concerned, Helm provides a number of examples of amateur poets and storytellers: “The Jewish women held their heads higher now, organised poetry readings (...);”<sup>12</sup> when prisoners were waiting for either being executed or taken to a camp, “they composed poems (...) on paper smuggled in by friendly Polish guards;”<sup>13</sup> “one day a group of the Poles began reciting poetry and telling stories;”<sup>14</sup> one of them was a Polish countess imprisoned at the Ravensbrück. She was well-known among other prisoners and even guards for her aptitude for storytelling. It could be assumed that Rose’s inclination to compose is, to a certain extent, based on historical figures.

Besides the overriding theme of war, Rose’s poems bear some resemblance to poems by actual war survivors in terms of their form. Shires points out that wartime poetry was characterised by short verses, fast pace and a lack of rhyme.<sup>15</sup> Philip Rosen and Nina Apfelbaum in turn maintain that poets who survived concentration camps tended to write short pieces, always free verse and often prose poetry. Their poetry was dominated by dark imagery, dedicated to the memory of an individual or a group, sentimental about the past and the future. It also lacked any specific place or time.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, the selection of details and vocabulary in the poems allegedly authored by Rose seems to allude to Holocaust poetry.

Apart from the fictional heroine’s works, the novel contains poems by the American author Edna St. Vincent Millay – a poet who was contemporary with the fictitious characters of Rose Under Fire. As James Gray claims: “Typical of the poet’s method is the device of catching a symbolic significance, some warning of the threat against survival, in an image that seems to be, all at once, spontaneous, startling, and

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<sup>10</sup> T.W. Adorno qtd. in *ibidem*, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> L.M. Shires, *British Poetry of the Second World War*, London 1985, p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> S. Helm, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 170.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 175.

<sup>15</sup> L.M. Shires, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

<sup>16</sup> P. Rosen, N. Apfelbaum, *Bearing Witness. A Resource Guide to Literature, Poetry, Art, Music and Videos by Holocaust Victims and Survivors*, Westport 2002, p. 105–106.

inescapably true.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, Millay’s poetry contains symbolic imagery and carries surrealist overtones. In her highly metaphorical poetry, she attempts to “balance the order of nature”<sup>18</sup> and thus reunite her inner self with the world around her. With regard to her war poetry, the “consciousness of the world’s misery seems to be immediate to the poet’s imagination”.<sup>19</sup> Correspondingly, her approach to war is personal and she identifies herself with others’ suffering. Her poetry offers an “account of the running battle between life and death”,<sup>20</sup> which is particularly intensified by the war. Millay depicts conflicting forces of the inner life and human spirit so that her poetic persona ponders whether to live or die. Her musing on human existence consists in “the drama of life becoming actually the ally of death”.<sup>21</sup> In spite of apocalyptic visions triggered by the war, Millay seeks beauty which is still preserved in nature. She tends to present “the harmony of opposites, the unity that may be resolved out of contradictions and the inevitability of rebirth following decay”.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, a metaphorical rebirth may be achieved by virtue of a reunion with nature. Furthermore, Millay’s poetry is alleged to raise the issues of corporeality, human psyche and femininity manifested through a metaphor of the body. As Catherine Cucinella claims: “Her representations of the body, and the womanliness (...) destabilize these binaries [the mind-body dichotomy].”<sup>23</sup> The individual is portrayed by directing the focus on particular body parts. In a symbolic sense, her poems may be seen as “extensions of the bodily person of the poet”.<sup>24</sup> The features of Millay’s poetry discussed above can be identified in poems included in *Rose Under Fire*, which will be examined in more detail in the next section.

<sup>17</sup> J. Gray, *Edna St. Vincent Millay*, [in:] *University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers*, no. 64, Saint Paul 1967, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> C. Cucinella, *Textual and Corporeal Convergence. Edna St. Vincent Millay*, [in:] *Poetics of the Body: Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elizabeth Bishop, Marilyn Chin and Marilyn Hacker*, New York 2010, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

## Food for Thought

The novel opens in 1944 and the first part depicts the struggles of a female pilot who is not allowed to conduct any dangerous missions reserved for men. It is when she is stationed in the UK that Rose starts writing poetry. She refers to her friend who died in action, bestowing bodily functions upon an aircraft and mingling the airplane with its pilot: “the storm will swallow the brave girl”, “their wings caress”.<sup>25</sup> Her verses are brief, fast-paced and rhythmic, e.g. “wing tip to wing tip”<sup>26</sup>, “dip, dip and swing”<sup>27</sup>. She tends to use words which reinforce the sense of velocity and action: “flashing”, “slicing the sky”<sup>28</sup>. It could be assumed that her style of writing poems is meant to evoke an accelerating airplane and the world seen from its cockpit. Images referring to the reality of a wartime pilot reoccur when she strives to describe everyday life: “Spitfire’s flight”, “polish the plane”, “propeller”<sup>29</sup>, “runway”, “crew shovels snow”<sup>30</sup>. In her poem relating to her friend’s wedding, she symbolically compares “goblet smashed” to “bomb-strewn broken glass”<sup>31</sup>; whereas slivers of glass are represented through a metaphor of snow and ice. Thus, the war determines the character’s daily routine and interferes with celebrations.

Bearing in mind Millay’s approach to femininity, it should be noted that Rose’s poem “Kite Flying”<sup>32</sup> personifies hope and portrays it as female. A kite evokes a metaphor of flying; however, it is awaiting a favourable wind. In a poem composed after the liberation of the camp, Rose refers to herself as being deprived of femininity: “no old woman but a walking ghost/on a skeleton’s frame”.<sup>33</sup> She realises that she does not long for sexual pleasure but only dreams of food which she constantly craves for. In fact, food reoccurs in her poems and being able to recite the names of foodstuffs, such as bread, candy or cranberry, seems to slightly satisfy her hunger.

The second part opens with a sample of Rose’s sample writing, which is intended to prove her identity in Paris after liberation on 17

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<sup>25</sup> E. Wein, *Rose Under Fire*, London 2013, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 34.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 30–31.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, p. 150–151.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p.137.

April 1945. However, this part is not focused on the representation of the post-war reality but rather on Rose's memories of the past relived in retrospect through the medium of writing. Her narrative is mainly concerned with the events which took place in the Ravensbrück concentration camp and the rabbits, that is the human subjects of pseudo-scientific research conducted there.

When Rose is sent to the camp, the experiments are already over and the rabbits share the barracks and bunkbeds with other prisoners. This is how she meets those who managed to survive the experimentation. She makes friends with obstinate and strong-willed Róža, who was involved in sabotage operations at the beginning of the war, and Karolina, who claims to have been a filmmaker before the outbreak of the war. The rabbits are presented as well-educated, eloquent and determined. Most of them were university students with dreams which the war shattered. It should be noted that their stories are only loosely based on their real-life counterparts. Wein has changed their names and any personal details.<sup>34</sup>

Rose often repeats a short poem – reminiscent of nursery rhymes – “Make new friends/But keep the old,/One is silver/And the other gold,”<sup>35</sup> when she meets new people in the camp, not necessarily prisoners. She does not judge others by appearances and is not biased against anyone. For instance, she makes friends with a Russian pilot, Irina, with whom she shares her passion for flying. Although her Polish friends are reluctant to share their bunkbeds with a Russian, they give Irina a chance and tolerate her. They cannot predict at that point that Irina will help Róža to escape. It should be noted that, unlike British or American women pilots who were not allowed to be combat pilots, Russian women pilots fought on the front. Therefore, Irina has more hand-in experience in flying than Rose.

Another new friend of Rose's is a German Kolonka<sup>36</sup>, Anna, who used to be a pharmacist before she was employed as a nurse assisting in operations conducted on the rabbits. She ended up as a guard since she refused to have sex with her boss, which did not prevent her from being both raped and punished. She was officially re-sent to Ravensbrück as a criminal and appointed a guard. Anna is regarded by Rose as a victim, who was manipulated and controlled by the regime; whereas the rabbits view her as “an angel of death” due to her involvement in

<sup>34</sup> *Elizabethwein*, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Wein, op. cit., p. 117.

<sup>36</sup> *a Kolonka is short for Kolonnenführerin, forewoman* [in:] Helm, op. cit., p. 176.

the experiments. She bears slight resemblance to Quernheim because of her responsibilities in the Revier; however, Wein avoids basing her characters on particular historical figures. When Rose meets Anna, she is responsible for supervising the prisoners' removing dead bodies and disposing of them. Anna is interested in Rose's descent and recipes for American dishes. It is an opportunity for the heroine to write a few words on a crumpled scrap of paper, which she craves so much.

Being imprisoned acts as an incentive to create poems. Due to a lack of paper and a pen, the heroine does it solely in her mind, thereby resembling a medieval bard. She composes chanting rhymes, lyrics and narrative poems dedicated to her camp friends. In her narrative poems for Lisette, Rose refers to the woman's murdered and deceased relatives.<sup>37</sup> She employs a metaphor of a cello for her previous life but "the cello cannot run"<sup>38</sup>. In a poem composed for Anna, the focus is directed at lips and an unlit cigarette.<sup>39</sup> It is indicated that even if this character survives, the flame of life has been extinguished and what awaits her is a grim future. In her "Triolet for Irina", Rose compares her friend's hands to wings,<sup>40</sup> thereby focusing on her corporeality but, at the same time, giving her qualities of a bird that can achieve freedom by means of flying. "The Subtle Briar" is dedicated to Róža so as to metaphorically portray her as a cripple. A briar is a wild rose, a kind of weed; yet, it has "desperate thorns" and "stubborn leaves", whereas its "subtle roots are never dead".<sup>41</sup> Although Róža is permanently crippled, she does not lack determination and strong-mindedness. She also displays a sense of humour despite the fact that her life is at risk.

Creating literary works not only helps the heroine to confront the harsh reality but also aids others in dealing with the ordeal of the war. The poems composed especially for her inmates give them both hope and food for thought. Interestingly, prisoners who have been deprived of all human rights and do not have their basic needs satisfied, e.g. they are starving, still long for intellectual stimuli. They manage to retain the freedom of using their brains and learning what they wish to, for instance foreign languages. Above all, they enjoy listening to and translating Rose's poems. The prisoners need something to cling to and what keeps their hope alive and their minds busy is Rose's poetry.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p. 100, 146.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. 100.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 154.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 115.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 142.



In the camp, she receives star treatment owing to her talents, nationality or even gender. Firstly, prisoners admire her as a poet and a friend. They are also thrilled that there is an American pilot among them. She is even provided with extra food in exchange for her giving others hope in a literary form. Secondly, the German Kolonka Anna treats this American prisoner more humanely and even takes the risk of providing her with calcium for Róża. Moreover, Luftwaffe pilots are taken aback when they realise that they caught a female pilot but they are also impressed with her flying skills

Owing to a letter of recommendation written by a Luftwaffe pilot who is dazzled by Rose's aviation skills, she is at first sent to a Siemens munition factory located near the camp. Having imagined a bomb destroying a city or killing her British friends, she refuses to conduct her work. As a punishment, she has to stand for many hours in one position, without food or water, let alone sleep. Being half-conscious, she composes a poem in her mind during that time. Her "Counting-Out Rhyme"<sup>42</sup> is adapted from Millay's poem carrying the same title. The latter depicts trees in rapidly changing seasons and, thus, focuses on the natural process of decomposition. The former relates to components of weapons being mass-produced at the factory and, consequently, is concerned with the destruction wreaked by explosives. Rose's poetry draws on surrealistic visions, symbolic imagery and apocalyptic overtones.

Since she still refuses to work, Rose is beaten and whipped. When she is being flogged for her insubordination, she keeps reciting poems until she faints. She concentrates on words so as not to feel pain, humiliation or fear. Thus, pieces of literature help her to endure the nightmare of concentration camp.

### Tell the World!

Owing to its numerous references to historic events, contemporary literature may be deemed an "age of testimony."<sup>43</sup> In other words, literary works are used as a medium of giving testimony. The period since the Second World War until the present has resulted in a proliferation of texts revolving around traumatic memories of that historic event.

Since Rose is sent to the camp relatively late, rabbits assume that she is likely to survive and pass the information about the experiments

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, p. 96.

<sup>43</sup> S. Felman, op. cit., p. 16.

conducted in the camp. Moreover, she is an American serving for the British, whereas her fellow prisoners want to make the allied forces aware of the war atrocities, of the fact that the Nazis experimented on healthy young women, affecting them both physically and psychologically. Attempting to reconstruct past events based on what Irina told her, Rose writes in her post-war memoir: "They yelled from the back of the crammed truck in French and in Polish, in English and German. <TELL THE WORLD! TELL THE WORLD! TELL THE WORLD!>."<sup>44</sup> Reconstructing other person's memory, she creates a surrealistic vision of camp prisoners being selected and transported to a crematorium. Rose is supposed to be one of them; however, she is hiding with some of the rabbits in a pit dug under the washroom. Others risk their lives or even sacrifice them, e.g. Karolina who fights for and wears Rose's coat with her number so that she is sent to the crematorium instead of her friend.

It is mentioned that Rose has heard about medical experiments being possibly performed in the concentration camps. Yet the British and Americans are reluctant to believe the rumours and deem them anti-Nazi propaganda. It is not until the allied forces liberated the camp that all their doubts about the gravity of the Nazi camps are finally dispelled. Since the women treated as guinea pigs were supposed to be annihilated before the outside world found out about the experiments, the testimony of other prisoners was crucial. In Wein's novel, it is Rose's responsibility to memorise the rabbits' names and convince people outside the camp that the experimentation was not merely anti-Nazi propaganda but a fact. She takes an advantage of a mnemonic technique used in poems so as to accomplish this task and composes a poem including the rabbits' names.

In the third part of *Rose Under Fire*, the Nuremberg trials take place, which leads to an encounter between the guards and the prisoners. Surprisingly, Rose refuses to give testimony and remains among the audience, claiming to be there as a reporter who intends to write an article on the trials. She has to face a meeting with quite disheartened Róża, who is one of the witnesses, as well as with Anna, who is one of the defendants. The protagonists express contrasting viewpoints: Róża regrets that Anna, who was a forewoman and doctors' assistant in the Revier, was not gassed although she was also condemned to death in the camp, whereas Rose is somehow relieved that her acquaintance is still alive. The former wants justice to be

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<sup>44</sup> E. Wein, op. cit., p. 87.

served; while the latter does not desire vengeance and adopts diverse viewpoints.

Although Rose talks a lot about “telling the world” and has given the promise to do it, she feels unable to speak about what happened. It may not be absolutely excluded that she decides not to testify since a number of the rabbits survived and they are able to offer more credible testimony themselves. Thus, she limits her fulfilment of the promise to providing the full list of the women’s names to the soldiers who liberated the camp. It should be also pointed out that the rabbits are helped by experts and doctors to prepare their statements before uttering them in the court. Having practised their testimonies is vital since the trials are likely to be particularly unnerving and traumatic for them; on the other hand, their statements become, to some extent, less authentic. Rose’s account is also written through the prism of her personal experiences and beliefs.

It should be noted that the whole novel is narrated by the heroine. History is thus reconstructed from the perspective of the protagonist who relives her traumatic memories in a narrative form. The second part of the novel opens with the account of Rose’s camp experiences which coincides with her writing a kind of memoir and attempting to narrate in retrospect the painful recollections of the camp. She writes her memoir while being accommodated by her uncle in a luxurious French hotel in the aftermath of the war. At the beginning, her only companion is a chambermaid who brings her food and keeps the room clean. Rose deliberately postpones her reminiscences and waits for the woman to be there. Although they do not hold any conversations and do not dare to broach the subject of the war, the chambermaid’s presence reassures Rose so that she is able to write down her most traumatic memories. She composes herself: “It’s OK – it was just being alone in the truck I didn’t like remembering by myself. Reading it over I noticed that I didn’t actually write down what I kept thinking then: What if no one ever opens that door? I’m done with it now – dry words on a page. The reality was much worse.”<sup>45</sup> What is emphasised in this passage is the inability to convey all aspects, ranging from physical to mental, of the past events. Some recollections may be distorted due to trauma, others due to limited capabilities of human memory.

At first, Rose struggles to retrieve her suppressed memories but in the course of writing she manages to tackle and somehow tame them. However, she states that “the reality was much worse”, which indicates

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<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, p. 75.

that she would never be capable of reproducing the past faithfully. In Dori Laub's opinion: "The horror of the historical experience is maintained in the testimony only as an elusive memory that feels as if it no longer resembles any reality."<sup>46</sup> No matter how much Rose desires to tell the truth about the events, she only retells it and recreates in a narrative form what happened in real life. She realises: "I do not remember what we did. I know what we did, of course, and I remember doing the same thing later. But I don't remember the first time I did it. It was worse doing it for the first time. And I have blocked it out."<sup>47</sup> This is how she concludes her account of moving hundreds of corpses, lifting them out of the bunks, undressing them, stacking them in rows on the floor of the mortuary, carrying them out to handcarts, hauling them to the crematorium and unloading them again. Rose is aware of the fact that she repressed some memories and how writing down her reminiscences might distort the past. It is highlighted that memory may be selective and fallible and, correspondingly, some details will never be uncovered. Nevertheless, Rose feels obliged to retrieve all her horrific memories so as to keep her promise given to the rabbits and tell the world: "I am so lonesome. I thought I'd want to forget last winter's hell, but now I am in a panic in case I do forget. So busy remembering that impossible list of Polish prisoners."<sup>48</sup> It is attending the Nuremberg trials and meeting friends of hers, who range from prisoners to a forewoman, that makes her feel guilty about not keeping her vow. It may be assumed that the novel itself constitutes her testimony and an attempt at dealing with her traumatic past.

One more aspect concerning the writing process should be taken into consideration while analysing *Rose Under Fire*. Laub alleges that "the event must be reclaimed"<sup>49</sup> so as to enable a traumatised individual to live. Despite experiencing the horror of the concentration camp, it seems that the heroine does not suffer from a post-traumatic stress disorder. Yet, if that is the case, it should be noted that her state of mind is first presented when she starts writing, which might have healing properties. In other words, she appears to experience traumatic growth which consists in narrating her traumatic memories. As professor Nigel Hunt claims, individuals who experience trauma can experi-

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<sup>46</sup> D. Laub, *Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle*, [in:] *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. C. Caruth. London 1995, p. 62.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, p. 120.

<sup>48</sup> E. Wein, op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>49</sup> D. Laub, op. cit., p. 70.

ence growth through the way they deal with their memories;<sup>50</sup> hence, connections between positive post-traumatic growth and narrative can be drawn. Developing an effective narrative can result in better understanding of traumatic experiences as well as enable a traumatised person to face their trauma and then successfully recover from it.

The heroine of *Rose Under Fire* draws consolation from composing poems in the camp and narrating her disturbing memories in the aftermath of the war. By dint of writing, Rose seems to re-discover her innermost self and to bring herself back to life: “That has convinced even me that I am still Rose – my handwriting has not changed. It is the only physical thing about me that looks exactly the same. I can still write.”<sup>51</sup> When the heroine is given a pen and a piece of paper so that her rescuers may establish her identity, her selfhood and personality seem to be regained through the act of writing. She is no longer an “English-speaking French political prisoner 51498” but a human being with name and the ability to express her thoughts and feelings in a written form. Furthermore, writing provides her with a sense of purpose in her life which was interrupted by the war and her imprisonment in the camp. Although writing brings her back to life, it is still a daunting task and a tremendous responsibility to produce a narrative based on what happened. “I think it’s taken me about the same amount of time to write this as it took me to fly it. That’s kind of incredible. I am writing at a rate of 170 miles an hour and going nowhere. I’m getting tired now.”<sup>52</sup> The fact of comparing her writing pace to the velocity of a flying plane indicates that her disturbing recollections of the past are tightly integrated with the narrative she composes.

## Conclusions

It is composing literary works that accompanies both Rose’s imprisonment and her period of recuperation in the aftermath of the war. Creative endeavours aid the heroine to summon the willpower to endure the ordeal of the camp and survive. They also raise her inmates’ spirits and the hope that they will not be forgotten. Not only did she survive but she is still willing to live owing to her desire to compose works of literature. All that she saw, recited or narrated seems to be inextricably connected.

<sup>50</sup> N.C. Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma*, Cambridge 2010, p. 77.

<sup>51</sup> E. Wein, op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, p. 63.

By narrating her haunting memories and harrowing experiences, she confronts her traumatic past and retains her memory of the deceased prisoners. However, the heroine does not know whether she has succeeded in “telling the world” and commemorating the rabbits. She will never know whether her account was convincing and emotive enough.

Being a victim of war crimes and a war survivor does not spare the heroine moral dilemmas or twinges of consciousness. First, she cannot admit to having befriended Anna; second, Karolina sacrificed her own life for her so that she could provide testimony; further, she has not been able to keep in touch with her friends with whom she shared the nightmare of camp. Regardless of the content and form of her testimony, she will always feel disloyal to someone and guilty about either what she has done or failed to do. It is not possible for her to avoid partiality and subjectivity while composing her personal memoir.

Another issue that remains unresolved is the content of what is to be told the world. Certainly, what is meant by “telling the world” is to tell the truth about the events. It should be noted that, first of all, an event is experienced by a number of people with different personalities, mindsets and background; then, memories are retrieved by individuals; afterwards, they attempt to recount their recollections and messages are passed also to those who did not experience the event. Consequently, the conveyed messages may not be deemed the absolute, objective truth. It is always a personally selected version of events and one of possible ways of reconstructing them. Nonetheless, it seems that the final victory is achieved by those whose story wins. It is narrative that is not consigned to oblivion and stands the test of time by being relived.

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## Abstract

The article aims to analyse Elizabeth Wein's novel *Rose Under Fire* with a view to exploring the role which literary works may perform in reconstructing traumatic experiences and preserving the memories of historical events. It is presented how composing texts either in a written or an oral form can aid in withstanding inhumane conditions, in this case imprisonment in the Ravensbrück concentration camp during the Second World War. The article is divided into three parts. The first of them examines how this twenty-first-century historical novel draws on the historical data, those concerning the rabbits of Ravensbrück in particular. In the second section, poems composed by the heroine are analysed in terms of their wartime prototypes and their impact on her fellow inmates. The last part delineates Rose's reconstructing traumatic

experiences in a form of a memoir by means of which the protagonist attempts to deal with her traumatic recollections.

Keywords: *Rose Under Fire*, *Rabbits*, Ravensbrück

### Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza powieści Elizabeth Wein *Rose Under Fire* pod kątem tego, jaką rolę dzieła literackie mogą odgrywać w procesie rekonstrukcji traumatycznych doświadczeń i zachowania pamięci o przeszłych wydarzeniach. Przedstawione zostaje, w jaki sposób tworzenie tekstów w formie pisanej bądź ustnej może pomóc w przetrwaniu nieludzkich warunków, w tym wypadku uwięzienia w obozie koncentracyjnym Ravensbrück w trakcie drugiej wojny światowej. Artykuł składa się z trzech części. Pierwsza z nich bada, jak ta dwudziestopierwszowieczna powieść historyczna czerpie ze źródeł historycznych, w szczególności tych dotyczących królików z Ravensbrück. W sekcji drugiej zostają poddane analizie wiersze autorstwa bohaterki powieści pod względem ich pierwowzorów z czasów wojny oraz wpływu na inne więźniarki. Ostatnia część ukazuje rekonstrukcję traumatycznych doświadczeń w formie pamiętnika, przy pomocy którego bohaterka powieści, Rose, usiłuje poradzić sobie z traumatycznymi wspomnieniami.

Słowa kluczowe: *Rose Under Fire*, *Króliki*, Ravensbrück